

Chapter One: The Prisoner

I think I got a lot of friends
But I don't hear from them
What's another night all alone
When you're spending everyday on your own?
Simple Plan: I'm Just a Kid

Harry sat on his bed staring idly out his window. His eyes were following a flying bird but his mind was elsewhere. He was still stuck at number four, Privet Drive, even though he had been assured that he would be rescued quickly. Well, no time better than the present, Harry thought. He knew that it had only been a week and a half, but he wanted out of this prison and quickly. He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep from attacking his aunt, uncle, and cousin.

It wasn't as if Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, or Dudley was giving him a hard time. For the most part they just ignored him, which suited Harry just fine. It was not having anyone from his world to talk to that bothered Harry the most. He thought he wanted to talk about Sirius to someone, anyone who knew Sirius was innocent. He thought he was ready, but he wasn't sure.

Harry didn't spend too much time thinking about Sirius or the Prophecy. Harry didn't want to guess what that meant for his future, all his plans. And when his friends found out about it.... He definitely didn't want to think about that.

He shook himself from his stupor, glanced once more at the birds flying outside, and went downstairs.

"Aunt Petunia," Harry asked his aunt politely, "do you have any chores for me?" Harry and his aunt had come to a silent agreement. She wouldn't ask him to do everything and Harry would do it without complaining. Harry found that the chores gave him something to do, something to distract himself from his thoughts. And it helped him build up his strength.

"Yes. Would you mow the lawn today? Please?" she asked overly politely.

"Yes." Harry had started working out when he had gotten to the Dursleys'. What good was a power the Dark Lord knows not, if he couldn't last long enough to fight Voldemort? So he had started to lift cans filled with sand and rocks, run around the block several times every morning (he could now sense the friendly eyes that watched him), and do 100 sit-ups and 50 push-ups. Eventually, he'd lift heavier weights, run more laps, and do more sit-ups and push-ups. Eventually, but right now this small work out tired him and left him sore.

Harry hated mowing. At least he only had the back yard to mow. This summer's heat wave was worse than last year's. The front yard was dry, yellow grass, but the back yard was lush and green. Harry knew the only reason Uncle Vernon watered the backyard (against all the rules) was so that Harry would have to mow it. But because it was only the back yard Harry finished the lawn mid-afternoon. He walked inside and found Aunt Petunia cleaning the living room windows. "Anything else?"

"No."

"I'll be in my room." Petunia bent her head in acknowledgment and Harry went upstairs. When would they rescue him?

Harry spent the rest of the afternoon in his room, but it was stifling in there. He decided to go for a walk to the play park and so he headed out the door. His feet carried him to the park automatically. He could feel the eyes of the Order members watching. He wished they would just talk to him once. He wished that they would jump out from their hiding places and say, "Surprise, we're here to rescue you!"

It was a daydream Harry couldn't help but wish would come true. Privet Drive was so alienated from the wizarding world. He wondered what Mrs. Figg would do if he showed up there for tea one day? Maybe he'd go there for supper tonight. Yes, he would.

Harry walked the few blocks to her house and started to turn up the sidewalk. Before he could, an old man called out, "Oi, sonny, 'elp me

with this!" The old man was carrying a huge plant and a shovel. Harry quickly crossed the street and grabbed the plant from the man.

"Where you going with this?" Harry asked, thankful that he'd been working out.

"Ta the play park," he said grumpily. The man led the way back to where Harry had started. "Over 'ere, put 'er down right 'ere." He started to dig a hole, but Harry couldn't watch him struggle with it.

"Here, sir, let me help." The man gave him the shovel and as Harry was shoveling he started to speak.

"No ma'er what I say, keep shov'ling, here me boy?" Harry nodded. "Good. Wotcher." Harry kept shoveling but smiled. "There ya go, li'le deeper there. Good, good. Now what were ya doin' in Wisteria Walk, young man? Nothin' there for a boy like ya." Harry nodded. "Wouldn't want ta give the wrong people the right idea, now would ya?" Harry nodded. "Good, good, a li'le wider there. Good. That's the ticket. Now help me get 'er settled." Harry helped Tonks straighten the plant. "Would ya shov'l 'er in, that's a lad." Harry shoveled in the dirt. "Thanks much, laddie. Good day ta ya." The old man turned to walk the opposite direction Harry needed to take to get home.

He decided that that was the Order's subtle but effective way to tell him not to go to Mrs. Figg's. He wished he could have talked to Tonks a little longer and more openly. This was turning out to be a long summer.

Back at number four Privet Drive, Petunia just about fainted when she saw the shape Harry's clothes were in. He told her that he had helped an old man plant a bush, but she wouldn't believe him. She made him wait in the entranceway as she laid newspaper for him to walk over.

When he finally made it to his room, he sank on his bed before taking off his dirty clothes. He knew his aunt would freak when she washed his sheets, but he didn't care. He just wanted out. "When are they rescuing us, Hedwig?" She flapped her wings and Harry let her out to hunt. He wished he could follow her.

A few more days went by and Harry was starting to crack. He had just woken up and the thoughts that had bothered him before sleeping were starting to hammer his brain once more. He had received no letters from his friends. None whatsoever. It was just like the summer before his second year, yet Harry didn't think it was because of Dobby this time.

He had a feeling that Dumbledore had told them not to write. And, of course, being the good little Gryffindors that they were they hadn't written. Not once. They didn't even send a little scrap of paper with the one short word "Hi!" on it. Nothing. There was nothing at all.

Harry had just sent Hedwig out with his letter to Ron, begging him for a note. Not even a letter, just a note. He didn't need any news in it; he didn't need any details. He just wanted reassurance that he hadn't dreamt the whole thing up.

But who's subconscious could come up with the horror that was Harry's magical and non-magical life? Harry was sure he didn't have a big enough of an imagination to come up with what had happened to him just last month, let alone the graveyard a year ago, the Shrieking Shack two years ago, the Chamber three years ago, and Voldemort stuck to the back of Quirrell's head four years ago.

Quirrell was four years ago! Harry couldn't believe it; it seemed just like yesterday. And five years ago at the end of the month... Hagrid had come and given Harry the best birthday gift he had ever had. (Not that that was a hard thing to do considering the gifts that the Dursleys gave him.)

But all he wanted now was proof that it had actually happened. Harry couldn't even trust his dreams or nightmares. What if they were just a crazy person's dream to make his made-up world seem real? What if he was that crazy person? What if he had just made up the whole last five years and he would wake up any second now? He'd wake up and it'd only be 3:49 AM on July 31 and he would only have been 11 for three hours and forty-nine minutes. No Hagrid, no wand, no escaping the Dursleys.

“Boy, get down here NOW!” Harry rolled off his bed and headed, slowly, downstairs to find out what his uncle was screaming about now. “Hurry up and get down here!”

Harry lazily rounded the corner into the kitchen and looked from his purple uncle to his pale aunt to the stranger sitting calmly at the kitchen table. Harry stared at this stranger for a split second and then drew out his wand.

“Who are you?” There was a witch sitting calmly at his kitchen table drinking a cup of tea, dressed in white robes with a sun embroidered on the front, and she had her wand sitting on the table within reach.

“Now, Harry Potter, we both know you can’t use that. Just put it away.” She said this with a voice used to being obeyed, but Harry kept his wand out. He could clearly hear the fake Mad-Eye Moody bellowing, “Constant vigilance!” Petunia hurriedly shut the curtains on the windows, after peering around for any witnesses. Harry wondered, suddenly, where Dudley was at 8:30 in the morning because he never got up this early and Harry had passed his empty room.

“No, I think I’ll keep it out for now, I can always use it in life-threatening situations. Now, who are you?” The witch smiled at him and nodded.

“You do have a head on your shoulders.” She looked at him for a second and then answered his question, in a way. “I can’t tell you my name, but as you should be able to tell from my uniform, I am an Auror.”

“Uniforms can always be taken off the dead and tortured,” Harry whispered, but everyone heard him.

“You must have had a hard life to think of that, Mr. Potter. I am an Auror and that should be enough for you.”

“It isn’t.” The witch looked taken aback by his simple answer, but she quickly regained her calm.

"A hard life indeed. I'm here to tell you not to do anything rash. To tell you, Mr. Potter, and your relatives," she nodded towards his aunt and uncle, "that Death Eaters are watching this neighborhood quite closely and we have no idea why. You can take my advice and leave this area or you can stay: it's your choice. That is all I have to say, goodbye." And with that she Disapparated back to wherever she had come from.

"What was that?" a very purple Uncle Vernon bellowed at Harry.

"Just a witch telling me what I already knew," he sighed tiredly. "I'm going back to my room and back to bed." Harry started to climb the steps but his uncle grabbed his shoulder.

"Oh, no you don't. I want the shed painted today, without any of your un-naturalism. Do you hear me?" Harry turned around and for a second Uncle Vernon was taken aback. The look in Harry's eyes was one of a dead person's: hollow and lacking emotion. But it only lasted a second and then they were filled with anger once more.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon, I hear you," Harry gritted between his closed jaw. He walked out the kitchen door and went out to the shed. There he found the paint he had used the last year and started to paint the shed. The day soon grew hot and Harry was sweating in his light T-shirt and shorts.

Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Over and over again.

Well, if this was a dream it was the most realistic dream he had ever had. The sun started to burn his back and neck and Harry needed something to drink. But he kept up the work. Harry hated this shed with a vengeance. Every year he had to paint it. The wood had never been sanded and was extremely dry from the two years of drought. Because of those two things the wood soaked up the paint and Harry knew he would have to give it a second coat.

Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Over and over again.

At one point Harry thought he saw a person looking at him from the neighbor's yard, but he shook his head. Those neighbors had a ten-year-old boy and a seven-year-old girl; they were both terrified of the criminal that lived next door. Harry couldn't tell if it was him they were actually afraid of or if it was the bully Dudley, but it didn't matter. No one would be looking at him from that yard.

Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Over and over again.

An hour or so later, something caught the corner of his eye. It was in that yard again. Harry looked over there without turning his head and saw someone looking at him. He shook his head and turned to look. It was gone, whatever it was.

Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Over and over again.

Harry worked through lunch and the hottest part of the day. He knew he should have stopped, but he didn't want his uncle angry with him. This summer had only gone so well because Vernon was terrified to yell, hit, or throw Harry out of the house. It seemed that that strange witch had sent Harry flying over the line he had to cross to anger Vernon and now his uncle was furious. Oh, well, Harry thought, nothing new with that.

Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Dip paintbrush in paint. Stroke up, stroke down. Over and over again.

Finally the shed was done and Harry went into the house wearily. In the living room sat Vernon, Petunia, and Dudley, all watching the television. Harry looked at the clock and cursed. It was past 5:30; he had been working on that shed for nine hours without a break.

"When is supper?" Harry asked his aunt politely.

"You, boy, are not eating anything tonight." Dudley turned to watch Vernon lay into Harry; it was his favorite sport. "You are grounded until I say you aren't anymore. You will only have two meals a day, because I am a generous man, and you are only allowed to send that owl to that crazy man to tell him that I'm still feeding you. Do you understand?"

"Aunt Petunia," Harry said, ignoring his uncle and cousin. "Seeing that I'm only allowed two meals, may I please have my first meal of the day, because I missed it since I was painting all day?"

Petunia looked from her husband to her nephew with clear indecision on her face. They had that unspoken agreement and Harry hadn't complained once about that shed and he usually did. She looked at her husband and spoke, "He hasn't eaten all day, Vernon. If we don't feed him once, those... those... freaks will come and hurt us. We need to feed him at least once today."

Vernon looked at her and thought carefully. "My dear, you're right. Would you please prepare something for him? Nothing much. In fact, bread and water would be fine."

Petunia got up and Harry followed her into the kitchen. "I'm sorry, about him." Harry just stared at her. "He's just a little shaken up about this morning and everything. Thank you for painting the shed."

"Where was Dudley this morning, Aunt Petunia?" Harry asked politely.

She looked at him oddly, "Dudley spent the night at a friend's house, Harry. He wasn't here all day yesterday."

Harry nodded to her and took the sandwich and lemonade she handed him. Harry quickly ate it, thinking about how little he knew about these people he lived with every summer. When he was finished, he went to his room. When would they get him out of here? And who was that woman watching him paint the shed?

"I thought they were getting us out of here quickly, Hedwig, but I guess not." Harry was sitting on his bed petting her. If Hedwig hadn't been there, Harry would have blown a fuse a week ago. She was the only creature at Privet Drive that could stay in the same room with Harry and not insult him, not cower from him, and not give him a disapproving look. She had kept him sane these three weeks. Harry couldn't believe it had only been three weeks, but that's what his homemade calendar said.

She spread her wings and idly flapped them. The sun was beginning to set for the night and she was ready to go hunting.

"Go on, girl. Have a good time." And with that Hedwig shot out the window.

The heat was stifling. Harry glanced around his room. On his desk sat his finished Potions essay. Professor Snape had decided to give the class homework, but they only had to do it if they planned to take his N.E.W.T.'s class. Unfortunately, Harry was planning on being in that class. He still hadn't gotten his O.W.L.'s results so he wasn't even sure if he could.

Strewn all over the floor were his schoolbooks, thrown there when he had gotten bored with them. He had most of his homework finished; just one assignment from Professor McGonagall that he needed some help on from Hermione. He had never finished any of his homework so soon. It was just because he had so much free time, but he had never before dreaded the boredom of having nothing to do. This was getting ridiculous.

On his wall was his countdown until school started. It had 21 tick marks on it; three long weeks in this prison. He had hoped it would only be a couple of days, or at the most a week and a half, but this... This was too long. He just wanted out. And that witch, last week, had recommended getting out. Should he tell his aunt and uncle what she had meant? No, Uncle Vernon would just throw him out.

The one thing missing in the room was letters or notes from his friends. He sent out his note, "I am fine, want out, Harry," every third day. But nothing ever returned with Hedwig. It was starting to really

annoy Harry. All he could think of was Hermione, Ron, and Ginny somewhere together and having fun without him. He hadn't even signed up for the Daily Prophet this summer. He knew getting the news from the Daily Prophet would only make him more depressed.

Harry glanced out his open window. Outside, a swallow caught his eye. It was swooping and diving catching bugs in its open mouth. It looked so free, so peaceful. It was so lucky.

"That's just pathetic, Harry," he said to himself. "You're envying a swallow. And now you're talking to yourself. How absolutely pathetic."

Harry lay down on his bed staring at his calendar. It always made him think of a prison wall, one with tick marks carved into it by prisoners. And that was what he felt like, a prisoner in the worst prison imaginable.

He drifted to sleep at about midnight thinking how pathetic his life was and what his friends would say if they could see the famous Harry Potter now.

"Where is it?" Harry screamed at a couple lying on the floor. "Where is it, you traitorous scum?" His high-pitched voice was dripping with loathing and cruelty. The woman's legs were broken and Harry could see the bones sticking out. She must have been lying on her left arm because Harry couldn't see it.

"We don't know what you're looking for. Just leave us alone," the man whispered from the floor. There was blood coming from his mouth and nose. His arms were both broken and one of his legs was tucked up underneath him.

"You know exactly what I'm looking for! Crucio!" The couple started to writhe in pain. Minutes passed, the scar on Harry's forehead in excruciating pain.

He was in a large, well-furnished house. It seemed that he was standing in their living room. There was a fireplace to the direct left of him and a couch to right. In between the couch and fireplace was an Oriental rug and on that rug lay the couple, thrashing violently in pain.

“Master?” A pathetic looking wizard crawled into Harry’s sight. “We can not find it. We’ve torn apart this house, but it is nowhere.” Harry lifted the curse from the couple and they started to pant for breath and continued twitching in agony.

“You can’t find it?” Harry said in a cold quiet voice.

“N-no, my Lord. We cou-couldn’t find it,” the ratty looking wizard stuttered.

“Well, Wormtail, you disappoint me once again. Crucio!” This time it was the wizard struggling with the curse. Harry waited a few moments and then said, “You will find it!” And with that he lifted the curse.

“I will ask you one more time and only once more. Where is it?”

“I don’t know where it is!” the man screamed at Harry.

“Very well, very well. I always thought you should have been a Gryffindor, Alex. You were always so foolishly brave and courageous. Very well. Then you must have the same weakness that they all have.” Harry turned to the woman on the ground and whispered a curse that even he couldn’t hear. Welts started to show all over her body. Not deep welts, but they bleed all the same. Her screeching horrified Harry. What was he doing? Why was he hurting them? And that’s when Harry realized what this was: a vision from Voldemort’s mind. Harry felt himself wishing it was a fake, but deep down he knew it wasn’t.

“Please. Don’t hurt my wife. Please.” The man was staring at his wife four feet from him.

“Master....” A witch who had been standing next to Voldemort the whole time spoke up. Harry knew the voice and hated the woman it belonged to.

“Yes, Bella,” Voldemort said patiently.

"Can I take off her other arm? And his other leg?" Voldemort looked from the witch next to him to the couple on the ground. What Harry had thought were hidden limbs were actually missing limbs, limbs that were on the ground ten or so feet from them.

"Where is it?"

"I don't know," the man sobbed.

"Very well. Bella, you may have the pleasure of removing the woman's left arm and both her legs." Bella walked up to the woman, giving the man a disappointed look as she passed, and whispered a spell. There was a loud ripping sound and the woman's screeching got louder.

"No, please don't hurt my wife. Please. Please, don't. Please," the man whispered. Harry looked at Bella's face and felt his scar explode in pain. On her face was a look of purest pleasure and Voldemort felt the same way. Bella whispered the spell again and one of the woman's legs was torn off. It flew a few feet in the air and landed with a thud. The woman was sobbing now and the man was inching his way towards her. One more spell and the last limb was torn from her body. The woman's body started to shake from the stress and she slipped into shock. This quieted her screams and Harry sighed in relief.

"Where is it?" Voldemort asked the man again.

"I... I don't know," the man was sobbing uncontrollably. "Please, stop hurting her."

"Very well. I'll stop hurting her. Avada Kedavra!" A jet of green light shot at the woman and she stopped twitching immediately. The man finally reached her body and started to sob harder over her broken and dead corpse.

"No, no, please don't be dead, no, no," The man whispered into her hair. He turned to Voldemort a look of complete hatred and rage on his face and screamed, "Why? Why must you do this to us?"

Voldemort looked down at the man. "Tell me where it is and you won't die the same way."

"I can't tell you. I don't know where it is. She did."

"Then why did you let me kill her, you fool?" Voldemort screamed at the man. "Why didn't you tell me that to begin with?"

"Because we would rather die then let you have it!"

"That can be arranged." Voldemort whispered his curse again and the man started to shriek in agony; welts were covering his body. "Let's see if we can find it in that pathetic brain of yours." Voldemort lifted the man's head. When he could see into the man's eyes, he said, "Legilimens!"

After several minutes, Voldemort dropped the man. "You are a fool." Voldemort turned from the man; he would let the man bleed to death for his foolishness. The old clock on the mantle started to chime. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Thirty. It was time to go. "My Death Eaters, we are leaving!"

About ten Death Eaters exited the house with him. They all left with a pop, but Voldemort turned back to look at the house in the afternoon light. It was a new house and from the outside it looked quite peaceful. Voldemort smiled. The inside told a different story. He raised his head and wand to the sky and shouted, "Morsmordre!"

Chapter Two: Home Is Where Your Heart Is

Home is where your rump is!
Pumbaa from The Lion King

Harry woke up with a scream, the image of Voldemort's Dark Mark still burnt into his vision. His scar felt like it was about to split open and he was shaking. He leaned over the side of his bed and lost everything that was in his stomach.

"Harry, you alright there?" Harry jumped at the voice; it didn't belong to any of his relatives. He groped around for his glasses, but whoever had spoken handed them to him. "Here you go, Harry. Is that better?"

"Tonks?" Harry asked, trying to see the person in his dark room.

"Yeah! We're here to get you and take you to the Burrow. How 'bout some light?" She waved her wand and all of Harry's lamps turned on. Harry covered his eyes; the light was way too bright. "Oh, sorry, Harry." She waved her wand once again and the lights dimmed.

"Thanks. Who else is here?"

"Well, Remus and Moody. Shacklebolt, of course. The twins said they needed to come to pay their respects to your cousin. I have no idea why." She paused shaking her head. "Let's see, who else? Dung is around as a lookout. Hestia and Dedalus are here too. Oh, and Minerva. And of course, yours truly."

"Is everyone downstairs?"

"Of course they are. They sent me upstairs to pack you up and take you downstairs. I came in and you were screaming. Bad dream?"

"You could say that. I need to talk to Dumbledore about it," Harry said while looking at his scar in the mirror. He had been sure that it had actually split open, but he had guessed wrong.

"Well, can you wait until tomorrow? He'll be visiting the Burrow then."

"Yeah, I guess so." Now that Harry thought about it, he wasn't sure he wanted to talk to Dumbledore. Not now, not since finding out about that Prophecy.

Tonks waved her wand, said, "Pack!" and all of Harry's stuff packed itself up into his trunk. "There, is that everything?" Harry nodded. "Good, let's head on down."

The memory of what met Harry's eyes when he entered the living room would always bring a smile to his face. Remus was trying to be polite and was talking to a furious Uncle Vernon. The twins were waving and smiling at Dudley like two schoolgirls with a crush on him, but Dudley was hiding behind his father. Moody had his cap off and his magical eye was extremely visible. It was zooming around and around and Uncle Vernon was staring at it. Shacklebolt was also trying to speak to Aunt Petunia, but she was trying to shrink back into her husband. They all turned at Tonks' "Wotcher!" and looked at Harry.

"What was that screaming, Harry? Did Tonks scare you with her puke green hair?" Remus Lupin asked Harry with a smile.

"It is not puke green, Remus!" Harry looked at Tonks' hair for the first time and smiled. It was puke green.

"Tonks," Shacklebolt stated patiently, "Everyone at work got together and voted. It! Is! Puke! Green!"

Tonks went over to the mirror and glanced at it. "Fine I'll change it, but what color should it be?"

"Gryffindor red," Harry suggested.

"Well, because it's you, Harry, I'll wear Gryffindor red. I, myself, was a Ravenclaw, way too brilliant to be in Gryffindor." She screwed up her face in concentration and turned her hair a deep red color. Aunt Petunia let out a slight scream.

"Get out of my house, you freaks!" Uncle Vernon bellowed. Harry was surprised, at first, but then he realized that Vernon felt safe and in

charge in his own house. That and Harry could tell that Vernon wasn't thinking properly because of his fear and rage. "I will not let you stay another minute and terrify my wife and son! OUT! OUT! OUT!"

"No, Mr. Dursley," Professor McGonagall said in a patient voice, as if she was speaking to a really slow person, "we are not going anywhere until we are given the signal to leave. You will have to put up with us for a few more minutes."

"You know what, this is way too boring. Let's add something to it." Tonks screwed her face into concentration and royal blue stripes were added. "There, red for Harry and blue for me."

"So, Harry, what was that screaming?" Remus asked again, laughing at Tonks' hair.

"Nothing but a really bad nightmare," Harry shrugged, not really wanting to relive it quite yet.

"Like how bad?" he asked, a look of worry on his face.

"Um." Harry felt everyone's eyes on him. Well, everyone's eyes but his relatives'. "Like last Christmas bad."

"Last Christmas? The snake one?" Remus looked even more worried. Harry nodded. "You need to speak with Professor Dumbledore."

"Yes, he knows that. He already asked to see him. Tomorrow, right?" Tonks said before Harry could.

"Yes," Moody said gruffly.

"What took you guys so long to come and get me?"

"Yes," Vernon said butting in. "What took you so long?"

"Mr. Dursley," Fred said giving up on Dudley. "I wouldn't stick your overly large nose into something that isn't your business."

“Unless...” George added with a sly smile; it was a smile Harry had learnt a long time ago to mistrust. “Unless, you wanted me to enlarge it for you. I have a wonderful product,” he took something out of his pocket, “that enlarges noses, eyebrows, and tongues.” Dudley paled considerably and Harry had to control his laughter.

“Boys,” Remus said tiredly. “We warned you to behave. So, either behave or leave.”

“Alright, Remus, we’ll behave,” Fred said with the same smile his brother was wearing.

“But only if he’s behaved this summer. Harry?” George asked turning to him.

“What?” Harry didn’t want to answer this question.

“Did he behave himself?” Fred asked, clearly hoping that the answer was no.

“I don’t care that the two of you are no longer a member of my house,” Professor McGonagall said crossly, “but I will tell your mother if you do anything to these Muggles. Now, behave.”

Harry sighed quietly and smiled at the twins. They had gone back to waving to Dudley. He shook his head at them; he would miss them this year. “So, what took you so long?”

“Harry this is neither the time nor the place to be talking about that,” Remus answered quietly.

“And there’s the signal.” Moody’s magical eye was pinned on something on the ceiling. Or, Harry thought to himself, pinned on something past the ceiling and in the sky. “Here’s the Portkey. Everyone who’s supposed to grab it, grab it. That includes you, Harry.” Harry grabbed the teacup Moody was holding out. “Good, and Nymphadora, you have his trunk?”

“Yes, and it’s Tonks, Mad-Eye.”

"If you say so. On three then. One. Two. Three." Harry felt the familiar tug behind his navel and then fell on top of Remus. He stood up and looked at the crooked little house that was called the Burrow. He was finally home.

"Harry!" Harry was knocked over once again by a very bushy brown haired girl.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry choked out. She had a very tight squeeze and he could barely breath.

"Mione, let him go or you'll suffocate him!" Harry looked over at his other best friend, Ron. The bright red hair was sticking up at all angles, as if he'd just gotten up. Ron noticed and his ears turned a little red. "They didn't tell us you were coming here tonight, so we were in bed when they woke us up."

Harry smiled as he gave Ron a quick hug. "Yeah, Tonks woke me up. Wish they would have told me that they were coming to get me."

"Let's get inside," Remus commented, glancing around warily. "It's late and you all should head back to bed."

"Hey, Ginny," Harry said. He had just noticed the quiet girl standing just outside of the circle Hermione, Ron, and he made. "You keeping Ron in line?"

"That's impossible. But Hermione is trying," she said with a mischievous smile on her face.

Harry looked at the blush on Hermione's face and on Ron's ears. What did Ginny mean?

"I thought we were going inside, but I must be wrong," Remus said with a smile just like Ginny's. What did they know that he didn't?

They walked up and entered the front door. He loved this house: there couldn't be a greater contrast to the Dursley's anywhere. Whereas the Dursley's house was immaculately groomed and sterile, this house seemed to be bursting at the seams. Everything was

everywhere, but it was perfect in Harry's mind. Harry could smell Mrs. Weasley's cooking and it made his stomach growl.

"Hungry, mate?" Ron asked with a smile.

"Yeah, I forgot to eat supper last night, err, tonight. And I lost my lunch earlier." Hermione glanced at him curiously, but she kept her mouth shut. "It sure smells good."

"I'm glad you think so, Harry." Mrs. Weasley said before she hugged him. "I'm glad you're finally here." She held him out at arms length and looked him up and down critically. "I think you've grown a few inches. But you look too skinny, have you been eating right? Have those Muggles been feeding you at all? And have you been sleeping all right? You look tired. If only they would have allowed me to go and get you three weeks ago..."

"Mum, let Harry be," Ron said exasperated with her.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley," Harry assured her with a smile. "It's just nice to be home."

"Oh, Harry," she cried and hugged him again. "Midnight snack is ready for anyone who wants it," she said after letting Harry go. Harry noticed her wipe her eyes.

"Harry, thanks for saying that," Ron said later after they were in his room and in bed.

"For saying what?" Harry asked confused. He had said quite a bit tonight. His mind wasn't working too quickly either; he was too full for it to work right.

"That this is your home. Mum, well, she loves you like a son, mate. You're stuck with her forever now. Not that that's a bad thing," Ron added, laughing, "but you made her day saying that. She's been so worried for you; we all have been. 'Mione was coming up with all these plans to rescue you. And they were all bad." Ron smiled and chuckled.

"What's up with you two?" he asked innocently. Harry had noticed them exchange several smiles while they were eating the feast Mrs. Weasley had made.

Ron's ears turned bright red. "We, um, we're going out now, I guess."

"You guess?" Hermione's voice said from the doorway.

"No, I know that. 'Mione, let's not fight tonight," Ron pleaded with her.

"Can I call you 'Mione too, Hermione?" Harry teased her. She hated that nickname.

"No, you may not, Mr. Potter. And don't you tease Ron about this." Hermione said in her "Prefect" voice.

"And why not?" Ginny asked innocently. "His ears turn a beautiful color of red." Harry noticed that both girls were ready for bed and were wearing their pajamas. Hermione went over and sat next to Ron, who put his arm around her. Ginny sat on the end of Harry's bed.

"Because teasing your older brother is a bad idea," Ron said menacingly.

"So, why can't I tease you, Ron?" Harry asked just as innocently. It felt so good to tease Ron. To smile and laugh again.

"Because, 'Mione would kill you!"

"Point well taken, she is deadly. You live a very dangerous life dating her, mate. I feel obligated to tell you this: you court death courting her." Hermione got up and hit Harry on the shoulder; Ginny was trying to keep her giggles in check. "Hey, Ron, are you going to let your girlfriend beat up your best mate?"

"N...", he started, but with the look from Hermione he changed it to, "Yes."

There was a small cough from Ginny that sounded a lot like "whipped" and Ron's ears turned a deeper red. Harry hadn't laughed

this hard since before Sirius' death. One quick thought about Sirius and Harry stopped laughing and tensed up.

"What's the matter, Harry?" Ginny asked quietly. Ron and Hermione were still teasing each other happily.

"Nothing," he whispered to the girl sitting next to him.

"Then why'd you tense up?"

"I didn't." Ron and Hermione stopped teasing; Harry and Ginny's voices had risen in volume.

"You did too."

"Fine, I was just thinking about Sirius, alright!" Harry shouted at Ginny.

"Yes, that is alright," Ginny answered quietly but firmly. "I was just thinking that he would be teasing Ron and Hermione something awful if he were here right now. He could get Ron's ears the most brilliant shade of red," she said laughing.

Harry smiled sadly, "Yeah, he could. How are those Cannons doing, Ron?" Harry asked trying to change the subject. He wasn't as ready as he thought he was.

"Same as normal. They're rubbish, but they're still the greatest team around. Hear about the Holyhead Harpies?" Harry shook his head. How could he? "Oh, right, the Muggles. Well, they're on fire and making big news."

"I've been a fan for ages. They only hire witches and I want to play on their squad some day," Ginny added wishfully. "They beat the Pride of Portree, Montrose Magpies, Ballycastle Bats, and the Wimbourne Wasps, the best teams in the league."

"Wow." Harry was glad that Ron had helped change the subject. But it didn't stop Hermione from glancing at him with a worried expression on her face.

“Where’d you go, dear?” Arthur Weasley asked his wife, Molly, when she came back downstairs.

“I just went to check up on them. They sound like they’re having a good time. They were laughing so hard and it was so nice to hear Harry laughing again.”

“What was that yelling, Molly?” Remus asked her. Arthur glanced at Remus; he hadn’t heard any yelling. Remus just shrugged.

“Oh, just a Weasley girl getting under Harry’s skin. He stopped laughing and Ginny called him on it. She made him tell her why.” Molly stopped and wiped a tear off her face. “He’s still missing Sirius.” She stopped and blew her nose.

Remus stood as if to go talk with Harry, but Molly caught his arm. “No, don’t, Remus. He’s not ready yet. He changed the subject and Ron brought up the Harpies. Sometimes I wonder how thick Ron really is.” She glanced at the clock across the room. “Remus, it’s almost four in the morning, why don’t you stay here tonight?”

“Yes, I think I will, if you don’t mind.”

“If I did mind, Remus, I wouldn’t have offered.” Arthur took one look at Remus’ distressed face and laughed. It was good to have Molly teasing people again. It must be because Harry’s here, he thought.

“What have you guys been up to this summer?” Harry asked them once they had exhausted the topic of Quidditch.

“You first, Harry. We’ve been doing all the talking so far,” Hermione countered, wanting to get Harry to talk about Sirius.

“Only if Ron gets his hand out of your shirt,” Harry countered just as smoothly. “Ron, seeing that Hermione doesn’t have the pleasure of having older brothers like Ginny does, I’m going to take that spot. If you hurt my little sis in any way, shape, or form I will forget that you’ve been my best mate for five years and pound the living day lights out of you. You hear me?”

Ron faked a gulp, but did remove his hand from under her shirt; he hadn't even noticed it creep up there. Hermione on the other hand was wiping a tear from her cheek.

"What's the matter, Hermione?" Harry asked confused, he had thought that would make her laugh.

"Nothing, Harry, nothing." Harry looked at Ron in confusion, but Ron was just as confused as he was.

"Did I do something wrong, Hermione?" Harry asked even more confused, because Hermione was crying now, leaning into Ron for support.

"Nothing, n-nothing," she sniffed. Harry looked from her to Ron to Ginny. Ginny, though, thought she knew.

"Hermione," she explained softly, "you have no idea how annoying it is to have older brothers. You really don't want Harry for one, either. He's too stupid."

"I'm sitting right here, you know," he said feigning hurt and anger.

"I know, but it's the truth," Ginny answered gently. "But then again, Ron doesn't have a clue either, so it might just be a problem with the whole male species." Hermione smiled at Ginny and stopped crying.

"Thanks Harry, for being my older brother," she managed to say.

"Is that what that was about?" Ron asked surprised. "You were crying 'cause that git just said the obvious? 'Mione, if I wasn't the one dating you, I'd say the same thing to your other boyfriend. Geez, isn't that obvious?"

"Yeah, but he said it," Hermione said as if it was obvious. "He didn't just take it for granted." Ron gave her a blank stare and Harry just smiled kindly. "Never mind. Harry, you were going to tell us about your summer."

“Oh, yeah.” Harry combed his hand threw his hair. “It was pretty much the same. A little quieter than I expected, but then again, Moody scared the crap out of my relatives. I did some chores, not that many though. Aunt Petunia and I had this, um, agreement. I did the chores she asked and she didn’t ask me to do everything. I started working out, seeing as I had all that extra time on my hands. I even finished my homework.”

Harry stopped and looked at them. Ginny saw the look in his eyes and it scared her. There was little emotion, except for pain and loss. Hermione and Ron couldn’t see it from across the room, but Ginny saw it clearly and she started to really worry about him.

“Why didn’t you guys write?” he pleaded with them softly. “There were times when I thought I had dreamt up the past five years. I couldn’t tell if I made it up or not, you know.” He shook his head and the look left his eyes.

“Mate,” Ron stated, “you have no idea how many Death Eaters were watching your house. So many that even the Ministry noticed.” Harry nodded, but Ron wasn’t getting out of it that easily.

“So?”

“We weren’t allowed to because they were taking all the letters sent your way,” Hermione continued for her boyfriend. “They even took those you sent, until the Order started to protect Hedwig. They didn’t want anything to slip into Voldemort’s hands.”

“You couldn’t even send a note that just said ‘Hi!’?” Harry asked angrily. He could feel his temper rising. He wasn’t even mad at them, but he was furious at Dumbledore. “What could Voldemort possible gather from a note that just said ‘Hi!’? You didn’t even have to sign it ‘cause I know your guys’ handwriting better than my own! I needed anything to prove that this world still existed!” Harry was shouting again, but he didn’t know when he had started. He was taking a deep breath to continue yelling, when a calming hand touched his shoulder. Harry looked over at Ginny and let that breath go.

"I'm sorry. I'm just fed up with being protected and coddled. You know? I'm sorry, Ron, you were only doing what you were told. I'm sorry, Hermione, you're right, we don't need Voldemort learning stuff about us. And I'm sorry, Gin, you didn't deserve that either." Ron gave Harry an odd look, the look of someone trying to figure something out. Harry though decided to ignore it. "I'm just so frustrated."

"About what?" Ginny asked quietly.

Harry decided to ignore that and moved on. "So that's my summer. What about your guys'?" Hermione and Ginny both saw the evasive move and were moments away from calling him on it, when Ron spoke up.

"Well, not much, really. We're staying here the rest of the summer. We've been in and out of Grimmauld Place, trying to keep it clean, but in my personal and professional opinion, that's impossible. Dad's been working overtime at the Ministry. It seems that attacks on Muggles using Muggle things have increased. Well, attacks on Muggles have increased, period."

"Cause we're here, though, it means we don't even know when there's an Order meeting, let alone what they talk about," Ginny continued. It seemed she was willing to let his comment go, but Hermione still looked worried. "Fred and George will let little things slip, but any big secrets, well, not even they will let those slip."

"You'd think they'd let us know Harry was coming," Ron said angrily. "Seeing as he's our best mate."

Harry smiled weakly, "No, I'm too big of a secret to let slip."

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny gave him a surprised look, but he wouldn't elaborate and they went on talking. Ginny and Hermione were concerned, though and kept shooting him anxious looks. Ron, well, he was concerned too, but he had learnt a long time ago that anxious glances and quiet whispers only delayed Harry's eventual talk, so he went on as if nothing had happened, bring up Fred and George's new shop in Diagon Alley.

Chapter Three: Secrets Always Hurt

Why is everything so hard?

I don't think I can deal with the things you said.

It just won't go away.

Simple Plan: Perfect World

"Good morning, sleepyheads," Molly Weasley said brightly to the two sleeping figures. "Breakfast is ready and, Harry, Professor Dumbledore is here to see you." Molly left and the boys hurriedly got dressed. They headed downstairs, covering their yawns behind their hands. The four of them had

maybe gotten three hours of sleep that night. They had stayed up talking until about five that morning. It was the sun's rays that had caused Hermione to grab Ginny and lead her to their room.

When they arrived downstairs, Hermione, Ginny, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, the twins, Remus, and Professor Dumbledore were all seated around the table eating.

"Good morning, boys. How are you this morning?" Dumbledore's unending cheerfulness annoyed Harry.

"Tired," Harry said as shortly as he could. Ron took a seat at the table, but Harry stayed in the doorway.

"Ah, you stayed up late talking I suppose," Dumbledore said, the twinkle in his eye diminishing a little.

"Yes. Seeing as we've been apart for three weeks, we had a lot to catch up on." Harry tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice but couldn't. The others stared at Harry and Dumbledore confused. What had happened between these two men?

"And did you manage it?" The twinkle was nearly gone.

“Not quite. There’s just so much news that I wasn’t told and a lot happened to them, so we barely covered the first week.” Harry paused and gave a sardonic smile. “Of course, we covered what happened to me in about a minute, seeing as it was the same old, same old. Stuck at the Dursley’s, doing chores, getting no letters, hearing no news, being watched 24/7. You know, the norm.” Harry decided he didn’t want any breakfast and headed out the front door for his normal morning run. He saw Mrs. Weasley get up, but Dumbledore waved her back.

“Let him go run. It is the norm for him to run before he eats,” he said in a tired, hurt voice. This made Harry even madder and he started out his run at a sprint.

What gave Dumbledore the right to sound old and tired? To sound hurt? Had he lost his godfather because someone made a mistake? NO! And why did he have to flaunt that he knew Harry’s daily schedule? Why’d he have to keep that Prophecy from him? How come everything seemed to happen to him? And why did they leave him at the Dursley’s so long? Why did his life seem to be so much harder than everyone else’s? Why?

When he got back thirty minutes later, he entered the house through the kitchen door. “I’m going to go take shower,” he announced to the room in general. He went upstairs, took a quick shower and went to his room to change into some non-sweaty clothes.

“That was rude, Harry.” Harry turned and stared at Ginny. He grabbed at the towel around his waist and gaped at her.

“Get out, I need to get dressed,” he choked out.

“No, we’re going to talk now, when I know you won’t run away from me,” she said calmly. Harry couldn’t understand how she could be so comfortable in a room with a half-naked guy in there too. If the roles were reversed, he’d be high-tailing it out of there. “Why were you so rude to Professor Dumbledore? What did the two of you talk about after the Ministry fiasco?”

“Nothing I’m telling you about. I’m mad at him though, alright? He thinks he knows everything, but he doesn’t. And because of him...”

Ginny waited for Harry to finish his sentence. “But because of him what Harry? Please, let me help you.” Harry was willing to talk but he was so uncomfortable without any clothes on.

“If I promise not to run away,” he bargained, “would you leave so I can get dressed?”

“Hmm. I’m not sure. I’m really enjoying the half that I can see already. Your working out sure makes for a pleasant view.” Harry blushed a scarlet red and gaped at her. “Fine, I’ll go. But don’t run away. I’d miss the view.” As she walked past him, she brushed her hand across his chest.

Why did she have to do that? Harry thought to himself angrily. They were getting along so well and then she had to do that. He hurriedly got dressed and opened the door.

“Alright, come in.” Harry sat in the corner where the two walls of the room met and watched as Ginny sat at the other end of his bed and leaned back. “What do you want to know?”

“Besides everything? I know,” she said quickly, putting her hand up to stop him, “you aren’t going to tell me everything. Why are you so angry at Dumbledore?”

“He kept something from me. It was huge and if I had known it earlier, I would have tried harder at Occulmency and Voldemort wouldn’t have been able to trick me like he did,” Harry answered quietly. He thought for a moment then went on, “If he had told me about it, I wouldn’t have gone to the Ministry and....” Harry tried to say it, but couldn’t manage it, so there was a small pause, before Ginny filled it in for him.

“And Sirius wouldn’t be dead?” Harry nodded. He was embarrassed because tears had started to fall down his face. He looked out the window so that Ginny wouldn’t see them. A hawk caught his eye, riding a thermal, circling and looking for prey.

"Harry, look at me." When Harry didn't turn, Ginny grabbed his chin and forced him to. "Don't play the what-if game." She reached up and wiped the tears off of his face. "A lot of things went wrong last year. How can you be sure that's why you went? How can you be sure if you had known that thing that you wouldn't have gone?"

"Because it is that big," Harry answered tiredly. "Because knowing it would have helped me see what Voldemort was up to that afternoon. Because it would have changed everything. Anything else?" Harry looked down at the girl leaning against him trying to wipe the tears off of his face.

"Yeah," she started with a smile. "What do you think of Ron and Hermione?" Harry's face lit up in a huge smile.

"About time they got together." Ginny giggled and smiled.

"Mr. Harry Potter, what are you doing with our sister?" George said, angrily slamming the door against the wall. Harry looked over at George, Fred, and Ron standing in the doorway, staring at him. Then he realized what it looked like. Ginny was holding his chin with one hand; the other was on his face and looked as if she was stroking it. She was also leaning against him for support. One of his hands was on her shoulder; he had been trying to get her to let go of his face. The other hand had been inching towards her waist so that he could tickle her; he knew that would have made her let go. They jumped apart and he looked at his shoes.

"Nothing was going on, George. Not anything, Fred. Nothing at all, Ron. We were just talking," Ginny said coldly to her brothers.

"It sure didn't look like nothing to me," Fred muttered waspishly.

"We didn't do anything, alright," Harry said irritably.

"Then what were you doing with your hands all over each other?" Ron asked in a stone cold tone. The look on Ron's face hurt Harry. As if he would ever do anything to hurt Ginny.

Ginny looked at Harry then shrugged. "Sorry Harry, they caught us in the act." The three boys' jaws dropped. They had only been teasing the pair. None of them really thought anything was going on. And Harry looked just as stunned as they did. "We were talking about Sirius and Harry wouldn't look at me. I grabbed his chin and was wiping the tears off his face. He, of course, being a guy, wanted no sympathy and was trying to get me to let go. I'm guessing he was going to resort to tickling me, the cheater."

There was a collective sigh from the three brothers. "So then why were you laughing?" Ron asked.

"Oh, Gin had asked me what I thought about my two best mates going out and I had replied that it was about time." Fred and George started to laugh with Ginny and Harry. Ron was looking at Harry oddly again, but his ears were a bright red.

"Anyway, Harry, Dumbledore said that you wanted to talk with him," Fred managed between laughs. "But he can't stay all day, so if you could go down and talk to him now, he would appreciate it."

"Yeah." Harry mumbled getting up and pushing his way out the door.

"Do you want some privacy, Harry?" Dumbledore asked when Harry had arrived in the kitchen. Everyone started to get up to leave, assuming that the shy boy would say yes. However, they were surprised with Harry's answer.

"No, secrets only hurt others. They can stay if they want. I'll end up telling Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, probably even Fred and George. And then the adults would either find out from one of them or from you. It'll save everyone time and energy if they stayed." Everyone sat back down. Mr. Weasley had left for work, but Tonks had arrived and was sitting at the table next to Hermione. Ginny took the seat on the other side of Tonks. Harry sat in the farthest open seat from Dumbledore and Ron sat next to him.

"Tonks and Remus and for that matter every person who went to pick you up informed me that you had a 'bad dream.'" Harry scowled, but

no one knew why. Harry was sick of being reported on. "I was also told that you wanted to talk to me about it. So, if you could?"

"Sure, Professor," Harry started coldly. Everyone was more than a little curious about what had happened between these men. "I fell asleep last night, but I had forgotten to practice Occulmency. I paid for it, though. I had another vision. I was inside Voldemort." Several of the people around the table shuddered at the name, but Harry just ignored them, "inside Voldemort's head again. He was torturing a married couple. He wanted something from them, but they wouldn't tell him where it was hidden. Wormtail was there and was searching the house with about nine or ten other Death Eaters. Voldemort tortured the woman, trying to get the man to say where it was, but he wouldn't." Harry paused, trying to shake the visual from his head.

"He then let Bella rip off the woman's other arm and legs." There were several gasps, but Harry just continued. "The man was missing one of his legs already. Voldemort asked again but the man wouldn't say." Harry closed his eyes; he could clearly picture the green light flying towards the woman. "Voldemort killed the woman. The man on the ground said that only his wife knew where it was and that he had no idea. Voldemort used Legilimency to find out if that was true. He was speaking the truth. Voldemort decided that the man deserved a slow death and let him bleed to death. He had used a curse to open lots of welts on his body earlier, but I couldn't even hear what the spell was. Tonks woke me up right after Voldemort had put his Dark Mark up in the sky. That's why I was screaming. That and the pain." Harry finished, rubbing his scar absently. The monotone of his voice surprised everyone.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Remus asked the boy. He was sitting directly opposite Tonks on the other side of the table and could see Harry's face clearly.

"I don't want to be able to see that, that..."

"Horror?" Ginny finished.

"Yeah, I don't want to see that horror anymore," Harry finished despairingly. "I mean it came in handy when Mr. Weasley was bitten,

but stuff like that..." Harry paused again, trying to put his thoughts into words. "It was just disgusting. And he enjoyed it; I know he did. Even though he didn't get what he wanted he was happy hurting them and killing them." Harry shook his head; he couldn't imagine what had made Voldemort like that. "It was just disgusting. And he didn't just hurt those two people. He used the Cruciatus Curse on Wormtail, his servant. Why anyone would want to serve him is beyond me. If Tonks hadn't scared me I would of thrown up twice, if not three times. It was that disgusting."

Dumbledore looked at him sadly. "Is this your first dream since school ended?"

"It's my first vision since school ended." Everyone noticed the one changed word and the dark rings around Harry's eyes. "Did it really happen, Professor?" he asked forlornly.

"I don't know, but I'll see if we can find any clues. Let's see, it would have happened last night." Harry nodded and then thought of something, maybe it didn't really happen after all. "So Friday the 13th, and you said..."

"Wait, Professor. I remember at the end that he listened to the clock chime. It was 5:30. And then when he turned to put the Mark up, it was afternoon light. If it was a true vision, wouldn't it have been past 12 midnight?"

"Yes and no. If he was in England, then I would have to say yes." Dumbledore paused and thought of something. He continued after that short pause but still seemed deep in thought. "But if he was somewhere else? Who knows what time it could have been?"

"Oh, I guess you're right." Everyone heard the disappointment in his voice.

"What's the matter with that?" Ginny asked quietly. Hermione glared, but Ginny was pretty sure Harry wouldn't explode at her.

"I was just hoping that that meant it didn't really happen, just a mind game that Voldemort was playing with me. You know, like with the

vision of Sirius,” he finished quietly. No one said anything for a while; in fact no one knew what to say to that. Mrs. Weasley, who was up and washing breakfast dishes walked over and gave the lost boy a hug. He didn’t even respond.

“Voldemort put up the Dark Mark?” Harry nodded over Mrs. Weasley’s shoulder. “Ok, that usually makes the news, especially if it’s out of the country. Tonks, when you go into work tonight, could you find out if it happened. I need to be going. Thank you for telling me, Harry. And... I’m sorry.” Dumbledore stood up and left through the kitchen door, before any of them had time to say goodbye. With a quiet pop Dumbledore was gone. Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry and went back to her chore.

“What’d he apologize for, Harry?” Ron asked looking at Harry suspiciously.

“How should I know? Maybe he’s just sorry I had to watch that. I don’t know,” Harry answered, but he knew. Dumbledore was once again apologizing for keeping the Prophecy from him.

“What took you so long to get down here?” Hermione asked, looking at them.

“Let’s go outside. It’s such a nice day,” Harry said quickly while Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny started to laugh. Harry got up, glared at them, and went to sit by the pond. The twins said goodbye and went to work. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione walked down to the pond and sat next to Harry.

“Sorry, mate. But your face turned redder than my ears,” Ron said to Harry. He then turned to Hermione, “We had a little misunderstanding.” And Ron told her what had happened.

“You were right, Harry, it was about time that Ron had asked me out. He can be so thick sometimes,” Hermione told Harry with a laugh.

“Hey, I’m sitting right here.”

"I know, your arm is around my shoulders and mine is around your waist. It's pretty hard to ignore that," she said kissing him on the cheek. She then turned towards Ginny and Harry and asked, "What did the two of you talk about then?"

Ginny glanced at Harry and he nodded at her. Ginny told Ron and Hermione everything, while Harry looked out over the pond. There were several birds doing some amazing acrobatics, which gave Harry an idea.

"Let's go play Quidditch. I haven't played in ages," he said when she was done. Ron and Ginny got up quickly, but Hermione looked at Harry.

"You aren't just trying to ignore this are you, Harry?" she asked suspiciously.

"No, I've been stuck inside at my relatives and was banned from Quidditch all of last year. Flying helps clear my head, so I'll be able to deal with everything better."

The three had a good time flying. Harry had forgotten how exhilarating it was to be in the air. He was chasing Ginny around at the moment. He knew he could catch her if he wanted, he was on the better broom, but he didn't. Ron was laughing at her when Harry turned sharply and knocked into Ron. Ron wasn't ready for that and nearly fell off of his broom. Ginny and Harry stopped flying; they were laughing too hard to fly straight.

Hermione had decided to stay put on the ground. She loved watching Harry fly. He seemed so happy up in the air and he could do some of the most amazing tricks.

"He's pretty good isn't he?" Remus said, laughing at his antics, but he startled her. "Sorry, I thought you knew I was here."

"That's ok and yes, he's amazing," Hermione said, agreeing with the man. She sighed wishfully and continued speaking, "I wish he'd tell us what's wrong though."

“Give him some time, Hermione. That’s all he needs, you should know that by now,” Remus said, sitting under a tree in the orchard. He picked a long piece of grass and chewed on it as he watched the three flying teens.

“I know,” Hermione said, annoyed, “but it’s so hard being patient with him. You never know how long it’ll be. This morning he told Ginny some stuff, but nothing we couldn’t already guess. But how long ‘til he tells us more? And the longer he bottles it up the worse he’ll feel.”

“I know, Hermione,” Remus answered patiently. He thought for a moment and went on, “But he’s a Potter and Potters aren’t good at sharing things in the right way.” He smiled in a sad sort of way. “I learnt that a long time ago with James. Just give him some time and keep your ears and eyes open for clues. He’ll be telling you a lot without telling you anything.” He got up, throwing the grass to the ground and headed back up to the house. He had a knowing smile on his face, and Hermione couldn’t help but wonder what he had figured out. Hermione watched him go, but she turned back in time to watch Harry pull out of a completely vertical dive.

Chapter Four:

It's My Party and I Can Cry if I Want To

I need another,
Like a brother
For a cryin' shoulder
3 Doors Down: By My Side

The rest of July went wonderfully for Harry. He spent time with his friends flying and talking, though they never really talked about the Ministry fiasco again. Which, in Harry's opinion, was just fine.

Dumbledore had gotten word to the Burrow that the events of the 13th had actually happened. He was learning as much as he could about the event, but there were some roadblocks. And that was all they were told.

Harry was awoken from his sleep on the 31st in the most sudden and wettest of ways.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" Harry glared at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny who were all holding a huge bucket that had just been emptied of its liquid contents.

"Yeah, well, you could of woken me up nicer," Harry grumbled.

"We could have, but what fun is that?" Ginny asked nicely.

"Mum says you need to hurry up or your birthday breakfast will be cold. Or gone, 'cause Fred and George showed up and they'll start eating it soon." Ron, Hermione, and Ginny left and Harry hurriedly got dressed. He took the stairs two at a time and jumped the last five. He was so excited; he'd never had a birthday party before. And it wasn't until two years ago that he'd gotten his first birthday cards.

"Mrs. Weasley, that smells wonderful!" Harry said to her when he entered the kitchen.

“Why, thank you, Harry, and a happy birthday!” she laughed, smiling at him fondly. “Everyone, hurry up and take it outside. We don’t want it to get cold.” Harry started to reach for the stack of plates near him but Mrs. Weasley slapped his hand gently with her wand. “Not you, Harry dear. Just go outside and sit down. We’ll do the work.”

Harry felt stupid sitting at the table watching everyone else work, but no one would let him help. The meal, of course, was excellent, as was the company. By the end of breakfast, Harry’s sides were sore from laughing. Bill showed up half way through the meal and wished Harry a happy birthday. Tonks and Kingsley showed up soon afterwards. Harry couldn’t have had a better birthday and it was still 9:30.

Fred and George decided that it was time for a Quidditch game and asked for volunteers. Besides the two of them, Ron, Harry, Ginny, Bill, Tonks, Kingsley, and Remus decided to play. Everyone else got ready to watch the game. Harry hadn’t had such a good time playing Quidditch in a long time. In fact, he couldn’t think of a better game than that one. He even managed to catch the Snitch right in front of Ginny.

“Harry,” Ron said as they were all heading back to the house, “I think you can get your old job back once school starts. You’re way better than my sis here,” Ron laughed, pushing his sister gently.

“Gin, you had better not have let me catch the Snitch just ‘cause it’s my birthday,” Harry warned the red head girl.

“It’s your birthday. I wish someone had told me. I would have bought you something,” Ginny replied in her innocent voice.

“Speaking of gifts, can we open them now?” Ron asked his mother.

“Yes, Harry can open his gifts now,” Mrs. Weasley replied, shaking her head at Ron’s enthusiasm. She added sadly, “Your dad said he’ll be late again tonight. It’s too bad.”

“Hey, Tonks, how come you’re not at work right now?” Harry asked the woman standing next to him. Her brilliant lime green hair reminded Harry of Fudge’s robes.

“Oh, Kingsley and I work the night shift. This is our time off. By the time the real party starts, we’ll be at work again. Wish I could be here,” she sighed longingly.

Harry loved all his gifts. Mrs. Weasley knitted him a new jumper, this one a deep red color. Mr. Weasley gave him a nice collection of used batteries. (Harry was glad Mr. Weasley wasn’t there, they all laughed at the gift.) Hermione gave Harry a book about famous seekers of the past. Ron got him some Chudley Cannon memorabilia. Tonks and Kingsley had bought him great Defense Against the Dark Arts books. Remus said he wanted to give Harry his gift later. So had Ginny. (The twins teased her something awful for that.) And the twins gave him a rather large supply of Weasley Wizarding Wheezes, to be used as he saw fit.

It was mid-afternoon when they realized that they had skipped lunch. Mrs. Weasley had also disappeared into the kitchen. Ginny went to ask her if they were getting a mid-day meal, but came back after a tongue lashing from her mother. Molly had said that they would eat enough that night and didn’t need any food now.

And she was right. Several others showed up for the meal that evening, while others left. It seemed to Harry that all of the Order of the Phoenix was there at some point, all but Severus Snape and Dumbledore. Which in Harry’s opinion was the way it should be. The meal was great and Harry opened even more gifts from those who had shown up. The night was late when Remus pulled Harry aside and asked if he could give him his gift now.

“Sure, Remus.” Remus took Harry down to the pond and sat down on the log next to the water’s edge.

“Here you go, I hope you like it.” Remus handed Harry a box-shape present, about the same size as his hand and half as high. Harry removed the paper carefully and stared at the wonderfully carved box he now held in his hands. “Open it up.”

Harry slid the cover off, noticing the picture of his parents on the reverse side. Inside there were two rings, a man's and a woman's. "They're the rings your parents wore after Christmas our sixth year," he explained. "James gave your mother hers with a promise. A promise Sirius and I had heard a million times already. He said that one day he would marry her and they would live happily ever after," Remus choked out. Harry looked at the rings in the box. He could feel the tears start to flow. "I carved them that box and gave it to them as a wedding gift, to hold these two rings. When James and Lily went into hiding, your dad gave the box to me, telling me to give it to you if something should happen to them. So, here you go. I hope you like it."

Harry reached over and hugged Remus. "I miss them, Remus. And Sirius. Why'd they have to die?" Harry sobbed. This was the first time Harry had actually cried for Sirius. Until now he had been holding it inside, not letting it out.

"I don't know, Harry. I don't know." Remus held on to the sobbing boy, but he couldn't help the few tears that fell from his eyes. It seemed that once the dam Harry had built broke, there was a flood of tears to flow. Finally Harry's sobs subsided and Remus let go of him. After a few minutes of companionable silence Remus said, "I'm going back up, Harry. You want to come with me?"

"No, I'm going to stay here for awhile." Harry watched the fireflies light up over the pond and listened to the frogs croaking around him. He thought of the life he had gotten so close to having with Sirius. Had it not been for Wormtail's escape, Harry would have spent the last three summers with him and Voldemort wouldn't have been able to rise again. Then again, if it weren't for Wormtail's betrayal, his parents would both be alive. The cruel twists of fate.

"Harry?" the voice of Ginny interrupted his thoughts. She saw that same lost look in Harry's eyes from that first night and it took all of Ginny's self-control not to hug him, not to give him the love and comfort he so desperately needed. "Can I give you my gift now?"

"Sure, Gin, go ahead." Harry brushed the last of his tears away. She handed him a small box and Harry tore off the paper. He took the lid off of the paper box and lifted out the necklace inside. It had a green stone pendant wrapped in silver wire hung on a leather cord.

"I found that stone when we were down in Egypt a few years ago. I decided to make you a necklace with it. 'Cause it reminded me of you," she added shyly. Harry looked over at the normally confident girl.

"You could of given me this earlier. It's wonderful." Harry tried to put it on, but he couldn't keep the clasp open long enough to fasten it. "Can you put it on for me? My fingers aren't small enough to manage it."

"Sure." She reached around him and fastened the clasp. "I'm glad you like it." He glanced at it happily. No one had ever taken the time to make something just for him. The sweaters Mrs. Weasley knit, though he loved them, were the standard gift given to her boys. This necklace was something different.

"Thanks, Gin."

"You're welcome, Harry." Harry glanced at her again. She was looking up at her home, listening to the sounds spilling from it. Harry thought the smile on her lips was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. She looked so happy. "Did you have a good birthday?" she asked absently.

"The best," and he wasn't lying either. It had been great.

"I'm glad. That's what mum wanted."

"Gin, can I ask you something that'll probably ruin this memory?" Harry looked over at her nervously. He shouldn't have said that, but now it was too late.

"What, Harry?" Ginny was now staring at him curiously.

"When Riddle possessed you your first year, how did you become un-possessed?" Well, that's just great, Harry, he thought to himself, bring up what has to be the worst memories of her life.

"That's a really random question, Harry," she whispered surprised.

"You don't have to answer." Harry was mad he even asked it now. I can be so stupid, he berated himself.

"No, I will." She looked out over the pond and thought for a while. "He just let go of the control. Sometimes he let me go suddenly, I would wake up and be somewhere and I couldn't remember how I got there. Other times he let go slowly; that was more at the end of that year. He wanted me to know who was boss and it was so annoying and so frustrating. I wish Percy hadn't freaked me out that one time I was about to tell you. It would have made things so much simpler. Why?"

Harry was surprised at how frank she'd been with him. "Cause at the Ministry, Voldemort possessed me and I was just wondering."

"Voldemort possessed you. Why didn't you tell us?" she nearly screamed at him. Ginny looked at Harry and he could feel the anger in her gaze.

"Because I didn't want to think about that night, let alone talk about it," Harry countered just as hotly. He took a deep breath and continued calmly, "Anyways, he let go of me after I thought about seeing Sirius again."

"What do you mean, see Sirius again?" Ginny asked looking into his eyes. They were so... dead. No, not dead, but... lost. He can't let Sirius go, she realized. He can't get over the loss. He's floundering without Sirius.

"Just what it sounds like, the pain was so unbearable. Voldemort... Hey, wait you called him by his name." Harry looked at her surprised.

"So what? I've called him that all summer. Glad you finally noticed," she reprimanded him coldly.

“Sorry. Voldemort wanted Dumbledore to try to kill Voldemort so that I would die. And I wanted Dumbledore to do it. It hurt that much. And I thought about seeing Sirius and my parents and Voldemort left me. I guess, or rather Dumbledore says, that it was my love for them that got rid of Voldemort, that he couldn’t stay in a body so filled with love.”

“That’s interesting, Harry.” Ginny was still mad that he had kept these things from them. She was used to not being told stuff, but he had usually talked to Hermione and Ron. He hadn’t told anyone anything about this. “What else happened that we should know about?” Harry knew she was implying the talk he had with Dumbledore afterwards.

“Please, Gin, not tonight. I’m not ready yet.”

“Fine, Harry, but please let us know soon.” She made him look her in the eyes. Harry was surprised at the amount of emotion in them. There was so much love and acceptance in them. “We want to help you with whatever it is.”

“Harry! Ginny! Time for cake!” Mrs. Weasley’s voice floated down to them from the house.

“Let’s hurry, Mum makes the best chocolate cake.” They got up and started up to the house.

“Thanks, Gin.”

“For what?”

“For talking.”

“No problem, Harry. That’s what friends are for.”

The cake was excellent and everyone had at least two pieces. Ron and George were trying to out eat the other. (Mrs. Weasley had made three cakes because she knew how many people would show up.) At the moment Dumbledore appeared in the kitchen door, they were at seven pieces each, both working on their eighth.

"Hello everyone. I have someone to introduce to Harry and to the rest of you." Dumbledore stepped into the room and to the side so that everyone could see the woman behind him.

"Thia?" Remus asked. The woman smiled and Remus leaped at the woman. Everyone laughed as Remus picked up the short woman and hugged her. "I thought you were dead along with...."

"No, I'm very much alive, Moony. Now, can you set me down before I hex you!" she said laughing. Harry looked at the woman closer. She had brown hair and tired blue eyes. Her face lit up when she smiled. But there was something familiar about her.

"Would you like to introduce her, Remus?" Dumbledore asked with a huge smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes.

"It would be my pleasure. This is my little sister, Synthia." Harry noticed the similarities immediately, but that wasn't what was nagging at him. "She supposedly died years ago, actually, many months after Harry was born. So where have you been, Thia?"

"Oh, here and there and many places in between," she replied loftily.

"Thia," Remus warned her quietly.

"You're no fun, Remy." The twins started to laugh at the nickname, but stopped suddenly. Remus looked over at them and then at his sister and smiled.

"Thanks, Thia."

"No problem," she said calmly. "I've been out and about, Remus. I can't tell you more, I'm sorry. But I'm back now and that's all that matters." The woman turned from her brother and looked Harry up and down. "So you're the teenage Harry that I remember as a baby boy. Gave your mum a hard time, you did. But she wouldn't have had it any other way," Synthia was smiling sadly as she spoke of Harry's mum.

"Where do I know you from?" Harry asked politely.

"I don't know," she sounded surprised and worried, "but you shouldn't. I 'died' a couple of months after you turned one."

"Oh." Harry looked at her closely. "But I remember you from somewhere." Harry could feel the memory slip right past his conscience thought.

"A picture maybe?" Dumbledore suggested quietly.

"That's it! You're in their wedding picture!" Harry looked at her, now recognizing her as the maid of honor. "You were a friend of my parents."

She smiled sadly at Harry, "Yes, I was in their year and was your mum's best friend. I'm glad you inherited Lily's brains. That, I think is a good thing, James didn't have enough to fill a walnut shell."

"Hey, Thia, that's my best friend you're insulting," Remus reminded her sharply.

"I know," she continued with a smile, "that's why I exaggerated. I was thinking to use a doxies' palm instead of a walnut shell, but I thought I should be nice." Thia smiled at him. "Oh, don't feel bad, brother mine, I'm just stating the truth." Remus hit her on the arm. "And what was that for?" she asked in a mock-hurt tone.

"For insulting James, as you normally do. But you're right about Harry getting Lily's brains. He's much smarter than James ever was." Remus smiled at his sister. "I'll wait for your apology 'til we're alone."

"Aw, Moony, you're no fun. You know that, right?" She waited for him to reply, but he didn't. "I'm here to wish Harry a happy birthday and to give him a gift from his mum." Everyone stared at her oddly, everyone but Remus who was looking extremely gloomy. "Aurors tend to be morbid people, we think we're going to die at any moment. And that's probably for the best. If we have kids, we tend to give our best friends something to give to the children if something should happen to us. I see Remy gave you the gift from your dad. Well, here's the gift from

your mum. You don't have to open it now. In fact, it would probably be best if you waited until you're alone."

She looked at him, tears in her eyes. "Lily gave that to me with tears in her eyes. I have always wondered if she knew she would die soon." The tears started to fall slowly. Remus leaned over and gave her a hug. "I'm not sure what it is, she told me not to open it. After you do, come to me and I'll tell you about it, whatever it is." The tears were falling faster. "I have to go now." And she fled the Burrow.

Harry stared at the empty spot where she had just stood. That had been his mum's best friend. He looked at the gift unsure of what to do. Should he open it with everyone around? No, he didn't think so. But he didn't want to be rude.

"Why don't you go put that in your room, Harry," Mrs. Weasley told him. "And then you can have another piece of cake." Harry nodded and walked up the stairs slowly. He didn't want to open it tonight. So he put it on his bedside table. Once back down stairs Harry noticed that Dumbledore had left and so had Remus.

"He wanted to say goodbye," Ron told him quietly, "but he said he needed to talk with his sister. He thought she might need someone to talk to."

Harry nodded in understanding and took the piece of cake Mrs. Weasley offered him. George and Ron were on their ninth pieces of cake. Harry couldn't believe anyone could eat that much sugar. Ron was lagging behind and was staring at his piece with hatred. George asked for his tenth before Ron had even finished his piece.

"You win," Ron said in defeat. "You win." George gave Fred a high five and then started on his tenth piece. "I'm going to be sick," Ron mumbled as he ran out of the kitchen.

Harry decided, later that night after he had gone to bed, that this was by far the best birthday he had ever had.

Harry couldn't bring himself to open his mum's gift over the next few days. Even the twins couldn't convince him to open it. Ron gave

Ginny a hard time about her gift to Harry, but Hermione thought it was a nice gift. Hermione had started to hit Ron whenever he brought it up.

The only problem with Ginny's gift was that Harry had no idea what to get her for her birthday on the eleventh. Ron had already bought Ginny Harpies memorabilia, so he couldn't get her that. Hermione had gotten her a chaser book, so Harry was stuck at a dead end. He wanted to get her something nice. He really liked his gift and wanted to get her something she'd like just as much.

On the third, Harry woke up from the dream he was having. Well, dream is too general of a term for what Harry had been having. Nightmare would be more specific. He sat up and put his glasses on. It was only five in the morning. He knew he'd never get back to sleep, so he took out the gift Thia had given him.

Harry glanced over at Ron, but he was still snoring and quite loudly too. Harry glanced back at the gift. He knew he was being stupid by not opening it, but something held him back. Harry decided that he would open it today, right now.

He slipped his finger under the first piece of tape, but froze. "She gave to me with tears in her eyes," was what Thia had told him. Did he really want to start a day by seeing something that had made his mum cry? No, he didn't think he did. He slipped his finger back out and put the gift back on to the table.

Now what should I do? Harry asked himself. He looked around Ron's room. Harry liked this room, even with the violent orange Chudley Cannon stuff all over the walls and ceiling. The frog was still croaking away in its tank. It was as messy as ever and crowded with both Ron's and his trunks in it. Harry reached over for his Transfiguration book. He had asked Hermione his question about it a week ago but he hadn't gotten around to finishing the essay. He decided to get dressed, go for his run, and then finish that up before anyone else was up.

Harry sneaked down the stairs (he didn't want to wake anyone up) and out the front door. His run was nice and he came back feeling good. He took a quick shower and grabbed everything he would need

to write that essay. He went down the stairs quietly and entered the kitchen.

To his surprise, Mrs. Weasley was already up and cooking breakfast. "Morning, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, good morning, Harry. I was wondering who would be showering so early. Did you have a good run?" Everyone was used to Harry's exercise schedule by now and Ron even joined him for the run every so often.

"Yes, it was very nice. Are you making breakfast?" Harry propped his book up against the vase filled with flowers and took out his parchment, ink, and quills.

"Yes, Arthur and I usually eat together before he leaves for work. Would you like to eat now or later when everyone's up?" Harry thought for a moment, but his stomach chose for him by growling loudly. "I'll take that as now," she said smiling.

Soon, Mr. Weasley was down and the three of them were eating quietly. Mrs. Weasley was reading the most recent copy of *Witch Weekly*, Mr. Weasley was reading the day's copy of the *Daily Prophet* (which now was more reliable about its stories) and Harry was writing his essay. This is nice, Harry thought to himself, wish I could do this with my own parents.

Mrs. Weasley caught the look of pain on Harry's face, but she didn't comment on it. Remus had told her to wait and she would. She had a feeling that it would kill her though. Harry was just so stubborn and needed to be comforted. How could she help if he didn't say what was the matter?

At seven, Mr. Weasley kissed his wife goodbye and patted Harry's shoulder as he went past him to the fireplace. He said one last goodbye and then floo-ed to work. "They're running him ragged," Molly muttered to herself.

An hour later everyone started to trickle down. First came Hermione and Ginny, both girls being early risers. Then Bill, who was living at

home now that the Weasleys were too. The twins came next, slightly groggy, but still their cheerful selves. Finally, 45 minutes after the girls had arrived, Ron stumbled his way down the stairs and entered the kitchen.

"Anyone seen Harry?" he asked sleepily. "His bed was empty when I got up."

"Ron, I'm right here," Harry said laughing along with everyone else. Until Ron woke up fully, he was unable to function correctly.

"Oh, shut it everyone," Ron said angrily and grabbed a cup of hot tea.

Harry, who had finished his essay a while ago, was talking to the twins about their business. They still counted him as member of the company and had told him he had part of the company's shares. He had turned down any money, telling them to give it to their parents. But Harry still liked to know what they were planning and selling. He loved to listen to what they would do with their own products.

"I'd put the Crying Whoopee Cushion on Snape's chair," Fred was saying. George was laughing so hard tears were falling. "It has a wonderful invisibility charm on it, so he wouldn't see it." He had to stop to get some air. "Then he'd sit down and it would cry out, 'Get your fat butt off me, you mammoth!' and then it would start to cry." Fred was laughing too hard to talk now and George started to choke on some toast. Mrs. Weasley patted him hard on the back.

"What's so funny, boys?" she asked them curiously. All three boys were laughing hard and having trouble breathing.

"Nothing, Mum," George replied between laughing fits. "Nothing at all." She frowned at them. She knew that when the twins didn't tell her what was funny whatever it wasn't all the great.

Ron was talking to Bill about the pyramids down in Egypt. "Do you know what curses they put on the tombs? Like, what the words were and everything?"

"And why would you want to know that, Ron?" Bill asked suspiciously.

"I was just planning on sending something to the Git. Nothing too mean," Ron said quietly, making sure his mom wasn't listening. He was, of course, talking about Percy who still hadn't apologized to the family.

"Anything I did know would be more than a little dangerous. The Egyptians only put the worst curses on their tombs." He paused looking at his youngest brother. "Ron, you need to get over that."

Hermione and Ginny were talking in quiet tones that Harry couldn't understand. However, he did understand the worried looks shot to his end of the table and sympathetic headshakes and such. Those two would always annoy him by being so clingy.

"So what do you think, Harry? Should we prank Ginny's gift?" George looked at him questioningly.

"Only if you want to be on the wrong end of a Bat-Bogey Hex," Harry replied seriously.

"Good point, but she can't do magic out of school," Fred said quietly.

"True, but she's stubborn. I think she'd wait 'til the first Hogsmeade trip and hex you then." The twins were opening a shop in Hogsmeade this fall.

"Oh, really good point there, Harry..." They were interrupted by that day's mail. Three owls flew in: one was tawny, another was black, and the third was a snowy owl similar to Hedwig. The tawny flew to Hermione, the black one to Mrs. Weasley, and the white one to Harry.

"Oh, good it's your school letters," Mrs. Weasley said excitedly. She handed Ron and Ginny their letters and then went back to washing the dishes. Ron, Hermione, and Harry exchanged nervous glance and then the other two tore into their letters with an excited vengeance.

Chapter Five: Diagon Alley

Doin' alright
Gettin' good grades
The future's so bright
Timbuck3: The Future's So Bright,
I Gotta Wear Shades

Harry opened his school letter hesitantly. He wasn't sure if he wanted to see the results.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL
of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme
Mugwump, International Confed. Of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please note that the new school year will begin on September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King's Cross station, platform nine and three-quarters at eleven o'clock.

Please also note that enclosed with this letter are your Ordinary Wizarding Level exam results. Also enclosed are the classes you have tested into and a list of every book you could need. Please note that you must sign up for the classes you want to take and only need to buy the books for those classes.

As your Head of House, I would like to congratulate you on your exam scores. They were in the top five of almost every class. Your scores also allow you to continue with your plans for the future. Congratulations.

I would also like to inform you that I have chosen you as co-captain for the Quidditch team. Katie Bell will be the official head captain, but the two of you can figure out how to work it. Also, because of this and the discriminatory nature of the punishment in the first place, your ban from Hogwarts Quidditch has been lifted.

Next, the Heads of Houses and the Headmaster have spoken amongst ourselves and have decided to recognize Dumbledore's Army (D.A. for short) as an official school organization. You will be given an old classroom to meet in, if you would like one, and either myself or the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher will

supervise your meetings. We hope that you will continue as the leader and teacher. We are all impressed with the scores of the D.A. members who took their O.W.L.'s or N.E.W.T.'s this spring and believe they have you to thank for that. This year we will have a competent Defense teacher, but we believe you can offer the students much more. We will talk about this more when you arrive at Hogwarts.

Congratulations once again and I hope you the rest of your summer holiday goes well.

Yours sincerely,

Professor M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

"What's yours say, Harry?" Hermione asked nervously. He was the last one to finish reading his letter and everyone could tell that it was longer than normal. He was also staring at it, stunned.

"Is something the matter, Harry?" Ron asked just as nervously.

"No, no. It's just that... Wait let me find it... Oh, here it is: "and the discriminatory nature of the punishment, your ban from Hogwarts Quidditch was lifted." Fred and George clapped Harry on the back and everyone said things like "Well, of course," and "You didn't really think it would stand, did you?"

"No wait. There's more. Well, actually it comes right before that. She's named me co-captain along with Katie."

"No way!" Ron said excited. "Captain, that's great, Harry."

"Yeah, no kidding," Harry said with a smile. "That should be fun. I'll just let Katie come up with all the plans and then I'll run you guys ragged at practice. We'll practice through all weather, rain, sleet, and snow!" Ron quailed at Harry's description of his plans. "You don't really believe me, do you, Ron?"

"I'm not sure," he answered safely.

“Are you kidding? I almost killed Oliver one year when he had us practicing almost every night in the rain,” Harry said, laughing. Fred and George laughed along with him; they had been on that team and had almost killed Wood too. “And the teachers are recognizing Dumbledore’s Army as a official organization of the school.”

“Does it really say Dumbledore’s Army?” Ginny asked. It had been her idea to change it to that from Defense Association.

“Yeah, and I quote, ‘recognize Dumbledore’s Army (D.A. for short)’ end quote. Snape must have been furious.” Harry re-read the letter again, making sure he didn’t miss something the first time around.

“What scores did you get?” Ginny asked curiously.

“I don’t know; I haven’t gotten that far. But she did congratulate me for them. That should be a good sign, right?” Harry looked at the next piece of parchment.

“I wouldn’t know, mate,” Ron answered Harry’s rhetorical question. “I failed Divination horribly. I can’t believe I didn’t get a ‘T.’” Everyone laughed at Ron, but he just glared right back at them.

“Well, you know, Ron,” Ginny chided him calmly, “it is usually a bad idea to describe your examiner as an ugly old man with warts, when you’re supposed to be telling his future. At the very least you should have told him that you saw said ugly wart faced examiner fail an even uglier red head boy. That might have gotten you some points.” Harry started to read the next piece of parchment and the farther he got the lower he felt his jaw drop.

Wizarding Examinations Authority
presents the
Ordinary Wizarding Level
Examination Results
for
Mr. Harry James Potter Charms
Theory Exceeds Expectations
Practical Outstanding Transfiguration
Theory Outstanding

Practical Exceeds Expectations

Herbology

Theory Outstanding

Practical Outstanding

Defense Against the Dark Arts

Theory Outstanding

Practical Outstanding

Potions

Theory Outstanding

Practical Outstanding

Care of Magical Creatures

Theory Exceeds Expectations

Practical Outstanding

Astronomy

Theory Outstanding

Practical Exceeds Expectations

Divination

Theory ——

Practical Dreadful

History of Magic

Theory Acceptable

Practical ——

Mr. Potter,

We would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your excellent test scores! You passed every test but Divination and of those tests only one was an Acceptable. With the exception of Divination and History of Magic you were in the top five of every test. That is a great honor!

Congratulations,

Professor Griselda Marchbanks

Head of Wizarding Examinations Authority

Special Recognition and Top Scorer

Due to intervening events Because of the horrible events of that night and the dismal testing of every student, this exam was graded on a "curve." For a detailed explanation and for the way it was scored please write to:

Professor Theodoric Tofty
Summerfield's House for the Well Aged
123 Diagon Alley
London, United Kingdom

Harry couldn't believe his test results. He read them three more times and the room got very quiet. They didn't know if he was re-reading it because the scores weren't great or if he had done extremely well.

Finally, Hermione got too restless and asked, "What did you get, Harry?" He looked up at her with wide eyes; it seemed that he didn't comprehend what she had just said. "Harry," she asked again, "what scores did you get?"

"Oh, hang on." He hurriedly counted and then said, "I got nine Outstanding's, four Exceeds Expectations, one Acceptable, and one Dreadful, in, guess what... Divination." Everyone stared at him. "That's eight out of nine OWL's! I can't believe it!"

And neither could Hermione. She grabbed his paper and looked at it. "Wow, two O's in Potions. And a special recognition and top scorer for your Potions practical and both your Defense exams."

"Damn, Harry, when did you become so bloody brilliant?" Ron asked in his normally charming way.

"I bet it's just because he's "Harry Potter, our new celebrity," George said in a good imitation of Snape. "They upped all his grades."

"Don't be stupid, George," Fred said, hitting him. "It's because he's "Mr. Harry Potter, sir," he said in a very good Dobby voice.

“Shut up, you two!” Mrs. Weasley said to her two twins. “Congratulations, Harry. I’m very proud of you! How many did you manage, Ron?”

“Well, eight, but my scores aren’t near as good as Harry’s. I’ve got a handful of A’s, quite a few E’s, and six O’s. What about you, Hermione? No, wait, let me guess. I’ll use my Divination skills... all Dreadful’s.”

Hermione hit him and said, “Of course not, you idiot. Mine are a lot like Harry’s. Lot’s of O’s,” (“Big surprise there,” Fred mumbled.) and the rest are E’s. No special recognitions, but top of a few classes. What does special recognition mean?”

“It means, my dear,” Professor Dumbledore said from the doorway, “just that: special recognition.”

“Would you please clarify yourself, sir?” Harry asked politely, but coldly. He didn’t want to deal with Dumbledore’s riddles today.

“I will. In other words, your scores are the best scores in at least twenty years. In Harry’s case, to find better scores in that Potions exam one would have to go back 21 years and that was Professor Snape’s test score. Harry came very close to beating it.”

“I bet he wasn’t too happy about that,” Ron said, laughing at the thought of Snape’s face when he found that out.

“Well, he was extremely surprised. We all were, in fact.” Dumbledore said with a smile.

“Why’s that, Professor?” Hermione asked curiously. Harry was feeling a bit out of place. He was being discussed as if he wasn’t there and it grated on his nerves.

“Well, Harry’s scores in that class have never been all that good. To get top score and special recognition, well, it seemed odd.” Dumbledore smiled at Harry. “The reason the scores were late this year is because we went over all of your tests. You deserved the grades you got and impressed us all.”

“Who is ‘us all’?” Harry asked coldly.

“Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick, Sprout, Marchbanks, Tofty, and myself, and one or two other examiners that you had. For your practical exams, the person who examined you placed their memory in my Pensieve and we all took a look at the memory,” Dumbledore smiled again. “I must ask, what thought did you use to make such a wonderful Patronus?”

“I thought of Umbridge getting sacked,” Harry said viciously. He looked down at his right hand. He could just make out the words, ‘I must not tell lies.’

“Ah, yes, that would be a happy memory.” Dumbledore slipped into thought and a slight smile appeared on his face.

“Professor?” Ginny asked after a moment. Dumbledore looked at the girl and waited for her question. “How far back would you have to go for Harry’s Defense scores?”

Dumbledore’s smile got even larger. “I was just thinking back to my fifth year at Hogwarts and when I sat my Defense exam. We must go 158 years farther to find a test score better than Harry’s.”

“Wait, I beat your Defense scores?” Harry asked stunned.

“Alas, my reign has ended. Almost 150 years, but yes, Harry, you beat both my scores. In fact, your scores, how do you teenagers say it, creamed them,” he finished with a laugh. Harry sat in silence. How did he manage that score? To beat Dumbledore? Why, that should be impossible!

“Let us take advantage of my presence and you three fill out the classes you want for next year. I will hand them directly to Professor McGonagall when I see her at afternoon tea.” Harry took out the third piece of paper and check marked six classes: Care of Magical Creatures, Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Transfiguration, and Potions.

Three days later, they went to Diagon Alley to buy this year's school supplies. Harry hoped that something would catch his eye for Ginny's gift. Tonks, Remus, Hestia, and Mrs. Weasley would accompany them. Harry hated the guard, but he saw the need for it. Anyway, these adults weren't so bad, though Harry knew there would be others hidden.

The first thing they did when they arrived was to stop at Gringott's. Harry grabbed some money for the day and hurried outside after the cart ride back. He and Ron headed out without the girls; Harry had told Ron about his problem. Tonks and Remus went with them.

"Ok," Ron said looking at his list, "I need Potion supplies, new robes, books, some quills, ink and... well, that's it. What about you, Harry?"

Harry glanced at his list, "I need the same things and some owl treats for Hedwig."

They headed first for Flourish and Blotts. There they picked up *Difficult Poisons and Their Antidotes* by Arsenius Jigger, *Advanced Transfiguration* by Miranda Goshawk, *Charm Your Friends: An Advanced Guide to Charms* by Felix Summerbee, *The In's and Out's of Defending Yourself Against the Dark Arts* by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, *The Advanced Monster Book of Monsters* by an Anonymous, and *One Thousand and One Magical Herbs and Fungi* by Phylliad Spore.

"Wow, the Defense teacher picked a book by Dumbledore. He must be good," Ron said happily. Remus gave him a quick look with a strange smile on his face. He opened his mouth to say something, but Tonks put a finger to his mouth and whispered something into his ear.

Then they went to Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. There they both got fitted for new school robes. (The twins had given their parents money, saying that they owed them for all the hair they had caused to turn gray and/or fall out.) They left with several sets each and headed to the Apothecary for their Potion's supplies.

When they had gotten all of the essentials, they started to go into shops by random, looking for something for Ginny. After the third shop, Remus asked them to come over and talk to him and Tonks.

"What are you two looking for?" he asked the two suspiciously.

"I need a gift for Gin," Harry confessed to him. "She got me a good one and I want to repay the favor."

"Oh, we're looking for a gift for your girlfriend, are we, Harry?" Tonks asked the boy, who blushed.

"No, for Ginny," he answered. Ron gave Harry an odd look, but didn't say anything.

"If you say so, Harry," Tonks said rolling her eyes.

"If I may ask, what's up with the two of you?" Ron asked Remus and Tonks.

"Oh, nothing," Remus started, but Tonks cut him off.

"If you call dating nothing, Remus, I'll need to talk with your sister and then dump you."

Ron and Harry watched as a very flustered Remus tried to explain himself to a very angry Tonks. At least, they all thought she was angry, until Ginny came up and said very innocently, "Tonks, you shouldn't give Remus a heart attack." Which started her, Tonks, and Hermione giggling.

"Sorry, Rem, I didn't mean to be mean, I was just giving you a hard time." She leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Let's get going, boys, you still need robes. Ladies, why don't you go wait for us at Fortescue's." They nodded and left, glancing backwards a few times as they went.

"Thanks, Tonks. Do you have any ideas?"

"Yes and no. Why do you like her gift?"

“Cause she made it just for me.” Harry thought for a moment. “Oh, I see. But how do I make her something and what do I make it out of?”

“Follow me.” Tonks led them to a small store at the end of Diagon Alley. “Here some of the rocks have magical properties, others don’t. Pick out the stone and let me buy it for you. You can pay me back, alright?”

“Sure.” They went into the dingy shop. Harry had never seen so many stones in one place before and each stone was interesting and beautiful in itself. They all started to look around and Tonks started to chat with the storeowner. It seemed that she was a regular customer. After several minutes, Tonks wandered over to Harry.

“All the prices are first offers. I should be able to get the price to lower by half. That’s my norm, at least; sometimes I can get him lower and other times he beats me. Let me know when you find the stone, but don’t make it obvious. I need to be the one to buy it for me, not for you.” Harry nodded.

After about five minutes Harry saw it. It was a beautiful real amber stone with some moss and a small butterfly frozen inside. Harry motioned Tonks and she picked it up. “Oy, Rick, how much for this rock?”

“I believe the price on that fine stone is 18 galleons. I can’t afford to give it to you any cheaper.”

“Uff, that’s too much, Rick. You’ll never sell it at that price. Let me take it off your hands for 4 galleons?”

“At that price, I’d be broke in a week. But, Tonks, since you’re such a good customer, I’ll lower the price to 16 galleons and 6 sickles.”

“I don’t get paid for a week and a half and I need the stone before that. And anyway, Rick, I can’t afford that price without saving for a month, with the way the Ministry pays nowadays. How about 6 galleons and 8 sickles?”

"No, no, my dear..." Harry listened in awe as Tonks beat Rick down to 8 galleons, 3 sickles, and 4 knuts. She also bought a chain and some metal wire with that price.

"Thanks, Rick, you're the best stone seller I know. And I know quite a few."

"Well, if it wasn't you, Tonks, I wouldn't have gone lower than 10, but for you, I'd do anything."

"And if the Ministry paid me better I would have bought it at the price you marked it at. Well, if the Ministry paid me better, I would be buying rubies, emeralds, and diamonds, not bits of petrified sap." They laughed and said good-bye to one another.

"Ok, so this is what you do." And Tonks taught him how to make the necklace for Ginny. If you held the stone up to the light, it glowed a soft red color. It was perfect, for out of the light it was almost clear and you could see the butterfly perfectly. Harry knew Ginny would love it.

They met the girls outside of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor. Ginny and Hermione had already finished a sundae each, but they readily ordered another when Harry offered to pay. The large group sat outside eating their ice cream. Hannah Abbot waved to them as she passed by with her mother. Seamus walked over and said hi, introducing his mother, who apologized for her misjudgment.

Harry watched as Dean slipped by unnoticed. Ron had told Harry about how he found out Dean had been cheating on Ginny. Seamus had let it slip on accident that Dean had a girlfriend at home. Ron had seemed more than a little angry with their roommate at the time, so Harry didn't blame Dean at all. If the roles were reversed, he wouldn't dare walk up to Ginny or any of her brothers.

After the ice cream sundaes, Ron convinced his mother to allow them to stop at the twins' shop before they returned home. Harry had been looking forward to seeing the shop he had heard all about. They went around a curve in the street and there it was. Painted bright red, it

had a huge sign in deep red and outlined in black. It read, 'Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.' They entered the small building.

Harry was surprised at its size, but he knew he shouldn't have been. There was row upon row of joke merchandise. Ron and Ginny showed Harry their favorite products, while Hermione tagged along. Mrs. Weasley went off to search for her sons.

"This is amazing," Harry said with a smile.

"No kidding," Ron shouted over the din. "I can't believe how much junk they've managed to get people to buy."

"It's not junk!" a horrified voice said near them. A young witch turned into the row they were standing in. "They're brilliant. Geniuses, even."

"If you say so, lady," Ron shouted back. "But I doubt it!"

"I can't believe you're insulting the two most amazing inventors!" she screeched at them. "Apologize right now!"

"No way," Ron said just as horrified as the teenage witch had been a moment ago.

"Brother dearest," one of the twins said slinging an arm around Ron's shoulder. "Do not anger the customers." The witch was staring at the twin with disbelief written on her face. (Harry always had a hard time telling them apart without the other around.) "Now apologize to her."

"No way!" Ron said stubbornly. The twin tightened the grip on Ron's shoulder to include his neck.

"Fred, that's enough," Ginny scolded her brother. "Look, miss, we grew up with those two, so trust us when we say that they aren't geniuses."

"I'm hurt, little sister," Fred said letting go of Ron's neck and herding them towards the back.

"I have no idea why," Ginny told him smiling. "You've always been proud of your lack of O.W.L.'s."

"True genius can not be measured by tests," George informed his sister. They had entered a large office at the back of the shop. "I'm glad you guys stopped by." They spent time talking with the twins, but then Lee Jordan poked his head in.

"Fred, that witch is back," he told them. "And she's frantic to see you."

"My fan club beckons," Fred said wistfully. "I must say good bye to you and may I survive another meeting with its President."

"He has a fan club?" Ron asked in disbelief.

"Yeah, and the President visits almost everyday," George struggled out between laughs. "She has long blonde hair, real straight and held out of her face by a headband. She has brown eyes and wears glasses."

"We met her," Ginny said with a laugh. "Ron insulted her and you guys. It was rather funny."

"Yes, I bet it was," George agreed. "She likes me the best, but seeing as she has no idea how to tell us apart we take turns playing me. Yesterday it was my turn, today is his."

"George Weasley!" Molly scolded her son.

"Well, I need to get back to work," he said hurriedly excusing himself. "Nice chatting with you all and hope to see you at the grand opening of our second shop." He nearly ran out of the room and lost himself in the rows of merchandise.

"Coward," Mrs. Weasley mumbled under her breath. They exited the story and headed back to the Leaky Cauldron and took the Floo Network back to the Burrow. It had been a nice productive day and Harry spent the rest of it making Ginny's necklace. He could hear the others laughing as they swam in the pond. He was glad he had an

excuse not to go with them. He still hadn't admitted to them that he didn't know how to swim. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to.

Chapter Six: Why Didn't You?

When you are with m
I'm free... I'm careless... I believe...
Above all others we'll fly.
Creed: My Sacrifice

Harry threw the bucket full of water on the sleeping girl and yelled, "Happy birthday, Gin!" He laughed at the sputtering Ginny. He was alone in this wake up call because Ron had chickened out. He hadn't even asked Hermione. He knew that she would have told Ginny in a heartbeat.

"There are dryer ways to wake me up!" she yelled indigently.

"Yes, there are, but what fun is that?" Harry repeated the girl's comment to him on his birthday.

"Mr. Harry James Potter! You! Are! A! Prat!" She threw her pillow at him. He caught it in mid air and bowed to her, twirling his hand several times.

"Why thank you, Miss Ginerva Molly Weasley. I take that as the greatest compliment coming from you, a younger sister to six prats. It is the highest compliment you could have given me." Harry bowed again. "If the Lady would like, I could give her her gift now. But I doubt she wants a gift from a prat, so I'll be on my way. Oh, and your mother says hurry up or breakfast will be gone by the time you get down there."

"Mr. Potter, get your sorry butt back in here. I'll take your gift now, if you want to give it to me." Harry looked at Ginny's eager face and he smiled at her. He knew Ginny loved to get gifts just as much as Ron did, so he was going to make her earn it.

"No, I'm going to make you wait, Gin. It'll be good for you." He bowed once more and she threw her other pillow at the back of his head. "My Lady, that was a cheap shot. I am sorely disappointed in you." And he hurried down to help in the kitchen before she could hit him again.

"You're alive, mate," Ron uttered in disbelief. "I'm impressed. The last time we woke Ginny up with a bucket of water we had hex marks for weeks. Mom was furious, 'cause she got a letter from the Ministry." Ron and Bill started to laugh. Harry had learnt several things about the relationship between Ginny and her brothers. One, she could play innocent extremely well and had the ability to get her brothers in trouble for her misdeeds. Second, even when Ginny did get in trouble she was hardly yelled at when compared to the yelling the boys got. And thirdly, the brothers loved it when she did get screamed at and pranked.

Harry smiled a knowing smile and told them conspiratorially, "I moved her wand and placed it in a very safe spot." The two brothers laughed, awe showing on their faces. No one did that to Ginny and lived to talk about it.

"And where is that, Harry?" Hermione asked him.

"Wrapped up in the box her present is in. And she won't be opening it until after dinner." Harry said patting one of his pockets. The twins who had just entered the kitchen started laughing. Hermione scowled at him.

"HARRY POTTER, WHERE IS MY WAND? YOU PRAT!" Ginny's thunderous voice drifted down the stairs.

"Ahh, the sound of an angel," Fred said dreamily.

"I always knew she was following in Mother's holy way," George said, looking up to the ceiling with his hands clasped near his heart.

"Be quiet you, two!" Ginny yelled as she entered the kitchen. She stomped over to Harry and glared at him. "First, you douse me with water, then you mock me." She took a breath; she was furious and Harry had a hard time not smiling at her. "Then, then you offer me your gift, but won't give it to me!" The twins oh'ed and ah'ed at Harry's daring; laughing as they went back outside with some plates. "Then, you insult me again! And now I can't find my wand, AND I KNOW WHO TOOK IT! GIVE IT BACK!"

Harry stared at her calmly, but he could feel the corners of his mouth curl up in a smile. "Now, Gin, that's not a very lady like thing to do. You should be composed and not at the top of a towering tantrum." Ron started to laugh even harder. Harry couldn't believe he was teasing her like this. When had he gotten the guts to do this?

She stared at him for a moment and then put out her hand expectantly. Harry just shook his head and grabbed a dish filled with eggs. "I'm sorry, Gin, but your behavior doesn't warrant the return of your wand. I am truly sorry." He stepped out the back door and a huge smile lit his face.

"You mark my words, Harry James Potter. When I get that wand back—and I will—I am going to hex you into next week." Harry shuddered involuntarily. Her hexes were always good ones and usually hurt in some way. He would need to come up with some way to deter her from seeking revenge.

The day was just as wonderful as Harry's birthday, though Ginny was irritated with Harry the whole time. Everyone found out about his wake-up call and his stealing her wand. He received a few compliments and it amused everyone. He just wished that Ginny wasn't so angry with him.

The feast Mrs. Weasley made for her youngest daughter was amazing. The tables out in the garden were groaning under the weight of all the dishes and the smell that drifted up to the house was delicious. Tonks and Shacklebolt were there for this meal. They had been switched to the day shift just a day after they had gone to Diagon Alley. Fred and George were talking to them quietly and all of a sudden Tonks' loud laugh rang out along with Shacklebolt's deep chuckle. All four of them looked from Harry to Ginny. Harry had a strong suspicion that they were talking about the events of the morning.

Mr. Weasley was home, thankfully, and was talking to Remus and Hestia, who was a family friend. "Did you hear about that Muggle attack over the full moon?" he was asking them.

“Yes, I did,” Remus answered sadly, while Hestia nodded her head. “I don’t understand why some werewolves must do things like that. It just gives the rest of us a bad name.”

“Yes, it just doesn’t seem right,” Hestia answered quietly. “But they are people, just like we are and can make the same stupid mistakes as the rest of us.”

Mr. Weasley nodded but added “Only for the rest...”

“Please, let me cut it, Bill” Mrs. Weasley’s voice came floating to him.

“No, Mum, I like it this way. And so does Melissa,” Bill said calmly.

“Who’s Melissa?” Harry asked Ron, who had his mouth filled with food.

“Wem, Mewissa is hi’ girlfriem” Ron answered around the potatoes.

“Ron, please, that’s so disgusting,” Hermione chided from Ron’s other side. Ron took a big gulp and smiled sheepishly at her.

“Sorry, ‘Mione. I just forget.”

“Just forget! Ron, you talk with your mouth full all...” Harry tuned out his best friends’ argument. He had gotten very good at that over the five years he’d known them. Instead he turned to Ginny, who ironically, was sitting next to him.

“Who’s Melissa?” Harry asked her, praying that she wouldn’t bite his head off. She continued eating as if she hadn’t heard him and Harry sighed. Fred, George, Tonks, and Shacklebolt all laughed again and Harry noticed that they were watching Ginny and himself closely. “You know, your brothers all find it amusing that you aren’t talking to me. You could wipe the smile off their faces by answering me.”

Ginny looked over at the twins who were now laughing hysterically and pointing at them. She rolled her eyes and said, “Melissa is Bill’s girlfriend. They met at Gringott’s and became fast friends last fall. When Fleur broke up with him over Christmas, she helped him

through it. He asked her out some time in April and they've been dating since. Alright?" Harry was sorry he asked. Her voice was cold and she never even looked at him. He was about to apologize when Bill shouted:

"Mum, lay off. I want my hair long and it's going to stay long!" Everyone at the table started to laugh at the two fighting people. It seemed Mrs. Weasley hadn't been able to help herself and had grabbed Bill's ponytail. Bill yanked it out of her hands, grabbed his plate, and headed to the kitchen. It seemed that that was the signal for everyone else to get up and leave the table. (They had, with the exclusion of Ron, finished eating a while ago.)

Ginny opened all her gifts, minus Harry's, everyone settling down in the living room, trying to find a good spot to sit. Fred and George cornered Harry once more afterwards and congratulated him for what seemed like the hundredth time.

"I thought we all agreed not to prank her," Fred said forlornly.

"Yes, I did too. You should have told us, Harry," George said quietly. "We would have kept your secret and helped you, too."

"But now you have to deal with her revenge," Fred sadly added. "It was nice knowing you."

"Yes, it was nice knowing you," George piped in. "If you think facing a Dark Lord is bad, well, just you wait and see. Ginny's a thousand times worse," he finished gloomily. Harry couldn't tell for sure, but he thought Ginny had heard them, for she got up and went outside.

"Hey, Harry, you want to lose a game of chess to me?" Ron asked him.

"No, no. I think I'm going to go give Gin her gift," Harry said, getting up and heading out the door. He looked around for the girl, but couldn't see her anywhere. He thought for a moment and then headed for the pond. She liked to sit on the log and think, so he figured she'd be there.

And Harry had guessed right. She was sitting on the log where Remus had given Harry his gift. "Would you like your gift now?" he asked her quietly, taking a seat next to her.

"Yes." There was a tremble in her voice that surprised Harry.

"What's the matter, Gin?" He went over and sat next to her.

She looked away and sighed, "Nothing. Are you going to give me my present or not?" There was a little bitterness there.

"Well, if it'll make you happy than I will," Harry hoped that he hadn't caused her to be hurt. "But you have to promise me that you won't seek revenge once school starts or ever. Promise?"

"Promise." Harry handed her the box with her wand in it.

"If you would have asked me nicely I would have given you your wand back. That's all that's in that box. Here's your present." He gave her the other box. She unwrapped it and opened the box.

"Oh, Harry it's beautiful!" She launched herself at Harry and gave him a hug and Harry hugged her back. "Did you make it yourself?"

"Tonks put me on the idea when I couldn't come up with anything else. I picked out the stone and she told me how to make it. I changed the plan a little, but, yeah." He shrugged. "So you like it?"

"Like it?" She paused holding the stone up in the light from the house. "No, I love it. Is that a butterfly inside?" Harry nodded. "I love butterflies! Could you put it on?" She handed the necklace to him and pulled her hair to the side. Harry reached around her to grab the other end of the necklace, but stopped. "What's the matter, Harry?"

"I was just thinking that you looked pretty in the moonlight." Ginny turned around and looked up at him. They were so close and Harry could feel his mouth lower towards hers.

"Ginny! Harry! Time for cake!" Harry looked up at the house filled with Ginny's older brothers.

"We should, um, hurry up. Or it'll all be gone," Ginny mumbled nervously.

"Yeah. Here let me put this on though." He pulled her a little closer and fastened the clasp. "Happy birthday, Gin."

They started to walk up to the house, but Ginny stopped and looked at him.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"For the necklace and for making it for me. If it had been Ron or any of my other brothers, they would have asked Tonks to make it. And for waking me up this morning, I've actually missed that."

"No problem, Gin. That's what," he paused for a second then finished, "friends are for." Harry didn't like the way that came out, but he couldn't figure out why.

"Where were you two?" the ever-nosy Ron asked.

"Harry gave me his gift," Ginny answered without saying where. "Isn't it pretty?"

"That's wonderful, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said admiring it. "Where'd you get it?"

"He made it, mum," Ginny stated while fingering it lovingly.

"That's nice of you, Harry," she said giving him a smile. She then turned to her sons and asked, "How come you boys aren't so sweet?"

"Thanks, Harry," Fred said scornfully.

"Yeah," George added. "Now we have to compete with that standard."

"That's just fabulous, Harry," Fred finished.

Ginny glared at them. "Harry gave me my wand back too."

"Thanks, Harry," George started.

"Yeah," Fred added. "Now we have to watch our mouths."

"That's just fabulous, Harry," George finished. Everyone laughed at the two, everyone but Ron and Hermione, who were both watching Ginny and Harry closely. They were standing closer than need be and Ron could see the attraction between their hands.

Ron leaned close to Hermione's ear and whispered, "Why doesn't he just ask her out?"

"Why didn't you?" Hermione countered her boyfriend.

He nodded sagely and whispered back, "Point well taken."

A few days later, Harry found himself alone with Remus. Harry looked at the man and was happy to see the laugh lines on his face. Remus seemed so happy with Tonks. And having his sister come back from the dead had to have helped. Harry wondered if he'd ever be that happy or if he'd even get the chance to make it out of his teen years.

"What are you thinking about, Harry?" Remus asked setting up the chessboard.

"Nothing much," Harry lied. He thought Remus knew that from the look he gave Harry. "Are you spending a lot of time with your twin sister?"

"My twin?" Remus asked, confused.

"You know, Synthia," Harry said blankly. Remus laughed and shook his head.

"Thia's not my twin. She's just about a year younger than me."

"Then how was she in my mum's class?" Harry asked baffled.

"I wasn't eleven by the September 1st cutoff date the year before I went to Hogwarts. And even if I had been, I wouldn't have gone," he said sadly. "The next year, Dumbledore became Headmaster and had the letter sent to me as it should have been. Thia was born August the year after I was, so she was eleven by the cutoff date that year. James and Sirius gave me a lot of grief about that."

"Oh," Harry said quietly.

"Don't call her Synthia to her face," Remus counseled him. "She reacts a lot like Tonks, only a lot worse."

"Thanks for the advice, but I don't know if I'll get to know her well enough to call her by her first name." They were playing chess now and Harry could already tell he would lose. He was also surprised at the look Remus gave him. It seemed like he wanted to tell him something.

"Got any stories to tell me?" Harry asked him after a moment's silence.

"Let's see," Remus said as his pawn captured Harry's queen. Harry couldn't believe he had let that happen. "How about a story about your mum?"

"Sure," Harry said absently. He was trying to figure out his next move.

"Well, Lily, Thia, and Samantha, or Sam for short, were the best of friends," Remus started.

"What happened to Sam?" Harry asked moving his castle forward three spots.

"Voldemort killed her and her children personally," Remus said softly.

"Oh," Harry said, regretting that he had asked.

"Anyway, they were bright, popular, and beautiful. They also had a good sense of humor and the rare ability to prank the Marauders."

Remus moved his bishop. "I think they were the only ones who could. It was our sixth year. This was the year Lily started to have second thoughts about your dad. If you hear Thia telling this story, she'll tell you that Lily finally realized that she actually liked him." Harry moved his knight forward. "Your dad had cooled off and was deflating his head, as Sirius would have put it." Remus moved his bishop to take Harry's castle.

"It was actually that summer," Remus said thinking a little harder. "That was when James realized he still had a chance and he asked her out that September. But this story took place the summer between our sixth and seventh year." Harry moved his knight forward and captured the bishop who had just taken his castle. "Did you plan that?"

"Yes, I did," Harry said irritably. Everyone seemed to know how bad he played.

"Nice move," he congratulated before continuing. "Thia had invited your mum and Sam over for the summer and I had invited the other Marauders. Sam had turned the invitation down at first, but she ended up coming." Remus moved his knight and took Harry's knight that had just captured his bishop. Harry stuck his tongue out at him. "Yes, James never liked it much either.

"It was July and we were swimming in the lake by our house. It was a wonderful day, but Lily, Thia, and Sam changed that quickly. Your mum was born the same year as I was, so she was already seventeen, just like I was." Remus started laughing, not just at the memory, but also at the fact Harry had walked right into his trap. "She was wonderful at Charms. It was her specialty and if you needed a Charms tutor, you went to her. She charmed our swimming trunks to emit smelly bubbles every minute or so. The girls started to laugh uncontrollably." Remus moved his other knight, "Check."

"Bugger," Harry mumbled.

"Sirius was trying to get away from the stench, which was impossible. There was this sinkhole, about twenty feet from shore, but only five feet under the water. He was running right at it and fell into it. He

must have panicked, because he didn't come up like we expected. Check," he said quickly after Harry moved.

"James who was closest, dove after him and rescued him. Check. Sirius wasn't breathing when they reached shore and it was a good thing Lily could perform magic. Check. She knew all about healing spells and got the water out of him and got him breathing quickly. Sirius always blamed them for lost of brain cells, but the girls said that he couldn't lose something he never had. Check mate."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Harry grumbled. "So Sirius almost died. What did you guys do in retaliation?"

"Nothing." Harry stared at him wide eyed. "Now you must understand that James wanted to stay on Lily's good side and Sirius was getting over a crush on Sam and had developed a crush on Thia that summer. Neither of them wanted the girls pissed at them and so we didn't prank them."

"I don't believe it," Harry said in awe.

"Neither did I at the time," Remus answered truthfully. "The girls and I expected some secret attack. In many ways that was worse. They sweated out the rest of the summer expecting the retaliation prank."

"That was brilliant," Harry laughed. Remus started to set up the board again. "No, I don't want to play again. I can only take so many losses."

"Ok," Remus said sadly. "At the risk of my head, how are you, Harry?"

"Fine," Harry lied. Harry knew that Remus saw through that one. He didn't look fine. He had rings under his eyes from lack of sleep and still hadn't gotten the weight back that he had lost from lack of nutrition. "Or, I will be fine given time. How are you and Tonks?"

"Great," Remus said with a huge smile. "I really like her," he confessed to Harry. Harry felt a little odd talking to Remus about this, but he sensed that Remus needed to talk. "She's great, you know. She's got the greatest sense of humor and knows when to make me

laugh. But she doesn't spoil me and she doesn't pity me." Remus stopped for a second. "That's nice. After awhile everyone's pity gets old. It's nice to have Thia here too, 'cause she's been dealing with my changes for as long as I have. She knows exactly how to handle me."

There was a quiet pause as they thought their own thoughts. "How are you and Ginny?" Remus asked cautiously.

He ran his fingers through his hair and Remus had a sense of déjà vu. If he had a knut every time he saw James run his fingers through his hair because of Lily, he'd be a rich man. "I like her, Remus. But I can't get the guts to ask her out." Remus laughed. "It's not funny."

"I'm sorry, Harry," he apologized. "I was just laughing at the odd twist of fate. James couldn't get the guts to stop asking your mum out, even when we all knew it would help his case. And now you can't find the guts to ask Ginny out, even though it would help you out."

"Thanks for the insight, Remus," Harry said sarcastically. "I really appreciate it."

"No problem, Harry," Remus added sagely. "I feel it is my responsibility to point out the quirks of fate and shove them in your face. But if it'll make you feel any better, I think Ginny will say yes, whereas your dad had to put up with six years of no's."

"Thanks," Harry said, this time meaning it. "Now I have to convince my mouth to ask her."

"Don't worry, you will, eventually." Remus looked at his watch. "Oh shoot, I'm late for dinner."

"Well, go. You don't want to keep Tonks waiting," Harry said with a laugh.

"I never said it was a date," Remus stated.

“No, but that’s the only thing you’d be worried about being late for,” Harry said with a laugh as Remus grabbed his cloak and ran out the door.

Chapter Seven: The Boy Who Made A Bloody Fool of Himself

I don't want to make this
Harder than it already is.
This is how it has to be
Simple Plan: I Won't Be There

Harry spent the last two weeks lazing around the Burrow. Remus and Tonks visited often and Remus would make time to talk to Harry about his parents. The girls and Tonks often disappeared for long periods of time. When they did return, they were always smiling. Harry enjoyed these weeks immensely because he got to hang out with his friends like a normal teenager.

He managed to gain some much-needed weight and his muscles started to show slightly. He was proud of his muscles. He had always been beaten up due to his slight stature. Now, he'd be able to stand a chance in a fight.

The downside of those two weeks was the nightmares. Though he didn't have them every night, they didn't let him sleep peacefully more than two nights in a row. Ron had started to grumble the past few days. Harry felt horrible about interrupting Ron's sleep, but Ron refused to accept any apologies. Ron told Harry that he'd be there for Harry whenever Harry needed him, even if it meant waking up every other night. Harry would then wonder if Ron would stick at his side if he knew about the Prophecy.

When any thoughts of the Prophecy, Sirius, or Dumbledore intruded, Harry would change his train of thought and think about something else, anything else. The Prophecy scared him. Thoughts of Sirius left him feeling deserted. And Dumbledore made him angry. Instead, he thought about the stories Remus had told him. Or he would try to figure out how to ask Ginny out. Both were dangerous topics also, but Harry preferred them to thinking about the first three.

Soon, September first arrived and Mrs. Weasley woke them all early. She had already made sure that everyone had packed everything they needed the night before. The normal chaos of leaving with the

Weasley's was lacking this year. With only four students and no younger children it was easy to get everyone ready and out the door. They took a Portkey to number twelve Grimmauld Place. Harry studied his feet carefully once they arrived. He wasn't happy to be back in this house. This building had served as Sirius' last prison. He absolutely hated to be in the house that reminded him so vividly of Sirius.

A few minutes later and they were all outside, walking to King's Cross Station. They still had half an hour until the train left so they were in no rush. They walked through the boundary and onto Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. The crimson Hogwarts Express was steaming on the tracks, filling slowly with students. Their group slowly headed to a wall where they chatted and talked until they had to leave.

Harry was still thinking about Sirius. He started a conversation with Remus, but couldn't keep his concentration on it. His mind kept straying back to last year. Sirius had come with them as a great big shaggy dog that had been his Animagus form. He had run along the side of the train until he couldn't any longer. And his mind wandered to the memories of that house; Harry hated that house.

Mrs. Weasley noticed some dirt on Ron's face and started to clean it off. The twins and Ginny started laughing at him; even Hermione was giggling. But at least she was trying to get Molly to stop, whereas Ginny and the twins were encouraging her.

Remus was still talking to Harry, but he wasn't really listening. He was thinking about last year, glancing around the platform. He noticed a girl he had never seen before standing in the gateway. She was staring at them and she blushed at being caught. He started to smile at her however, at that moment Narcissa Malfoy stepped through the gateway. She grabbed the girl's arm and whispered something in her ear. The girl nodded submissively, but violently pulled out of the woman's grasp. That's great, we have another Malfoy now, Harry thought to himself sarcastically.

"Harry, are you even listening to me?" Remus asked, noticing the scowl on his face. Surely Harry wasn't scowling because they were talking about his Quidditch captaincy.

"No, sorry," Harry apologized. He had no idea what Remus had been talking about. "What were you saying?"

"Nothing important enough to repeat," Remus answered tiredly. Harry had started becoming extremely vacant at times. At those instances it seemed that he wasn't even living in the world around him. "What were you thinking about?" he asked trying to figure the boy out.

"Sirius." Harry glanced at his shoes. He didn't want to talk about him here on the platform.

"Oh, he came with us to drop you all off last year, didn't he?" Remus asked, trying to get Harry to talk about his Godfather.

"Yeah."

"Harry, you really shouldn't bottle it all up," Remus chided him. Harry heard the rebuke in the statement and felt his temper rise. Why did they always tell him what he should and shouldn't do?

"I know," he answered, trying not to lose his temper.

"But, Harry, the longer you wait to talk about it, the more violent your anger and grief becomes." Harry felt his patience snap. Why did they always have to do that?

"Yeah, whatever!" Harry looked at his watch. "It's almost eleven. We should board the train," Harry said angrily and pushed away through the crowd.

"Mr. Potter, where do you think you're going?" Mrs. Weasley asked indigently.

"It's time to board," Harry told her logically.

"Are you not going to say goodbye to everyone?" Harry looked at her surprised. It hadn't even occurred to him to say bye. He was used to just disappearing from the Dursleys or running to catch the train with

the other Weasleys. Molly noticed the surprised look and once again cursed the Dursleys.

"I'm sorry. Bye Fred, George." He shook their hands knowing he would see them on the first Hogsmeade trip. He turned toward Remus and silently apologized to him with his eyes. "It was nice spending time with you, Remus. Thanks for everything Mrs. Weasley." Harry walked over and gave her a hug. "I really appreciated everything."

"No problem, Harry. Come back for Christmas this year, won't you?" Molly was beside herself. That was the first hug Harry had given her.

"Of course." The train whistled, signaling to everyone that it was nearly time to leave. Those going to Hogwarts and hadn't boarded yet, ran to the train and jumped on just as it started to pull out.

"Wow, that was close!" Ron gasped. "Get a compartment for us, won't you two. We have to go to the Prefect's meeting. See you later." Ron and Hermione started to walk towards the front of the train.

"C'mon, let's go, Harry." Ginny started looking in compartments and Harry followed after her. They only found one with enough seats for the four of them, but the new girl from the platform was in it.

"I don't want to sit in there with her," Harry said with some bite.

"And why not, Harry?" Ginny asked surprised at the amount of venom in his voice.

"'Cause she came with the Malfoys, Gin, and I don't want to deal with a Malfoy right now," he answered tiredly. He ran his fingers through his hair distractedly. Ginny had learnt to recognize that as a sign of weariness or deep thinking for Harry. She wondered which it was this time.

"There aren't any other compartments, Harry. We'll have to put up with her."

"Fine, then let's get this over with," Harry said angrily. He slid the door open and glared at the girl. She had long white blond hair just like Draco's, but her eyes were a beautiful honey brown color. Harry took a deep breath and said quickly, "Look, I know you came with the Malfoys and so must absolutely hate me and my friends, but there isn't anywhere else to sit, so we're going to have to deal with one another." Ginny entered and stood right behind him.

The girl looked at him confused. "Tell me again why I have to hate you, I don't even know who you are," the girl asked. Harry could tell that she was annoyed by the tone of her voice.

"You came with Malfoys, so you must be a friend of theirs. Any friend of theirs is a supporter of Voldemort and because of that you must want me dead. I'm the reason Voldemort fell the first time and I'm the reason why Lucius is in prison."

"What?" The girl must be really slow. How clearer could he get?

"Do I have to spell it out? You support Voldemort and I'm Harry Potter, the-bloody-boy-who-lived! You all want me dead! Are you really that dense or something?" Harry inquired. He wanted this conversation to end; so that he could start to ignore her. Ginny reached over and put a hand on his arm. He felt his whole body relax; but the girl seemed to find insult in what he had just said.

"So, just because I happened to come with my only living relatives, I'm evil, twisted, and a follower of the idiot Voldemort?" she yelled at them in a strange accent.

"You're not from around here, you sound funny," Ginny stated calmly.

"No, I was born in London, but my family moved to the States when I was a month old, and I only moved back because the idiot that I'm supposedly serving killed my parents," the girl retorted irritated. "Now do you have anything else you want to say or do you just want to continue with your insulting frenzy?"

Harry realized that he had made a huge mistake and sank down into a seat across from her. "I'm sorry, I just assumed..."

"Yes, well, do you know what assuming does?" Harry shook his head. "It makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me.'" Ginny started to laugh and Harry joined her. The girl smiled at them and it was genuine.

"I'm very sorry. Let's start over. My name is Ginny and this is Harry, the-bloody-boy-who-just-made-a-fool-of-himself. He's going to apologize the entire way to Hogwarts, so just learn to ignore him. It's kinda cute, but it gets old really quickly." Harry reached over and punched her in the arm. "That didn't hurt, you're such a wimp." And with that she punched him back.

"Ow! That hurt Gin," he teased back. "I'm going to tell your brother on you."

"Tattletale!"

"Yes I am and proud of it!" Harry turned back to the girl that was watching them with a smile. "So, I am sorry. I just don't get along with Draco..."

"Understatement of the year," Ginny mumbled.

"Shut it. And when I saw that you arrived with them, I misjudged you. If I would have thought it through, I would have realized you'd be sitting with him now, instead of here all by yourself." Harry stopped and looked at her. "So you're related to them. And I thought my aunt, uncle, and cousin were bad."

"Yeah, Lucius was my mom's brother," she explained wearily, "and so Narcissa is my aunt and Draco my cousin. It sucks living with them. I was supposed to live with my best friend's family, but they couldn't find my parents' will, so I ended up here."

"That sucks," Ginny said. "The summer must have been bad."

"Yeah," she said carefully. After a moment's pause she asked, "Who was that boy being attacked by his mom near you?"

"What? Oh, Ron!" Harry started to smile. "That was Ron, Ginny's brother and my best mate. The bushy haired girl was Hermione, my other best mate. And the twins, I'm sure you noticed them." She nodded. "Well, they're Fred and George, Ron and Ginny's older brothers. There're also three others, but Ginny's the youngest. Ron, Hermione, and I will be sixth years this year and Ginny will be a fifth year."

"I am a fifth year, thank you very much." Ginny was more than a little sore at being younger than the other three. "Did you ever say your name?"

"No, but it's Sephra Carrigan." She held out her hand and shook both Harry's and Ginny's. "I'm a sixth year. I'm glad to meet both of you."

"Yeah, and I'm really sorry about that," Harry mumbled again.

"Harry, shut it. You called Voldemort, Voldemort. Why?" Ginny asked Sephra curiously.

"I'm not sure. My parents called him that and in the States, we um...." She seemed a little embarrassed for what she was about to say, but Harry and Ginny nodded at her encouragingly. "We make fun of the British for calling him 'You-Know-Who'. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Ginny replied quietly. "It is really stupid." Harry rolled his eyes; as if it wasn't just this summer that Ginny started to use his name. Ginny caught him and glared at him while she was talking. "The only one from our group that calls him that is Ron. He's a bigger wimp than Harry, so you'll have to be extremely patient when dealing with him." The door to the compartment opened and Ron and Hermione stepped in. "Speaking of the devil, this is Ron and this is Hermione," she said, pointing to each in turn.

"What are you doing sitting with her?" Ron asked rudely, glaring at Sephra. "She came with Malfoy."

"Thanks for telling me something I already knew, Ron," Ginny hissed at him. "It's not her fault she came with them, just like it wasn't your fault Mum felt compelled to clean your face." Ron turned his glare

towards his sister, but she just laughed at him along with Harry and Hermione and, naturally, caused his ears to turn a little pink.

“Why did you come with them?” Hermione asked through her laughter.

“I live with them,” was all Sephra said.

“Why do you live with them? I sure wouldn’t want to if I had a choice,” Hermione pushed curiously. Sephra looked at the floor of the train.

“Because.”

“Because why?” Hermione asked again.

“Why did you call yourself ‘the-bloody-boy-who-lived’ earlier?” Sephra asked Harry obviously trying to change the subject. The four just stared at her. “I’m basically from the States, remember? I didn’t catch what your name was other than Harry.”

“He’s Harry Potter,” Ron said, staring at her as if three horns had just sprouted from her head.

“Oh, the baby who beat Voldemort?” Harry just stared at the girl, who spoke about his parents’ death so frankly. “I’m sorry. I’ve just learnt it as a fact in World History. I’m so sorry, that was rude. Now I’m going to apologize the whole way to Hogwarts,” she added with a slight laugh.

“That’s alright. It’s kind of nice meeting someone who didn’t know who I am, who didn’t look at my scar first,” Harry said to her. And it was nice that she didn’t try and sneak a peak at the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. Not to mention, extremely odd.

“I’m sorry though. I should have known better. I mean, my parents still get the London Daily Prophet and they told me about England during his Reign of Terror. That was stupid of me. Sorry.”

“How about this? Because you both are going to be apologizing to each other the whole way, let’s just call it even. Deal?” Ginny asked glancing at them both.

"Fine," Harry replied and Sephra nodded, but she was still blushing. He remembered her saying something about the Malfoys being her only relatives. Yet it sounded as if they were alive. Maybe he had just heard her wrong? "Why do you live with the Malfoys? I mean, you said earlier that you should be living with friends and that you live with your only living relatives. But you've made it sound as if your parents are alive."

Sephra turned her head away from them and Harry thought he saw tears on her face.

"I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?" Why did he always make girls cry?

"No, no. It's just that my parents died this summer. I really haven't coped with it yet, ya know. And.... Oh! I'm sorry." The tears were falling freely down her face.

"No, I'm sorry." Harry looked quickly at Ginny. He didn't want her mad at him; he was close to having the guts to ask her out. "We're even again. No more sorry's, I don't want Ginny mad at me."

"What about me, mate? It gets on my nerves too," Ron said to Harry.

"Yeah, but she hits harder." Ron took offence at Harry's words and punched his arm. "Like I said, she hits harder."

"Would you two stop fighting? It's starting to get really old. If you don't mind me asking, how did they die?" Hermione asked Sephra politely.

"They were killed. Murdered by Voldemort." Ron and Hermione looked at her oddly. They weren't used to strangers using his name. "It isn't such a big deal in the States. Anyways, they died while I was at my best friend's house and I didn't know 'til the Aurors came to tell me. I'm living with the Malfoys only because they couldn't find my parents' will."

"Do you play Quidditch?" Ginny asked to change the subject.

"Yeah, my dad taught me and my brother when we were little and I played on the intramural team."

"You have a brother?" Ron asked perplexed. "Where is he? Why isn't he sitting with you? Why didn't he arrive...? Ow, Hermione, that hurt!" Hermione, realizing that it wasn't a good topic, had stomped on Ron's foot.

"He died last summer. The Aurors still don't know how or why he died," Sephra said shortly. Harry noticed even more tears fill her eyes.

"What position do you play?" Harry asked trying to change the subject to safer ground.

"Seeker," she said grabbing a hold of the new topic. "I love it."

"Harry's the Gryffindor Seeker," Ron informed her.

"You never know, Ron," Harry laughed out, "the captain might not like my style of flying."

"That's just stupid, Harry," Ginny rebuked him.

"Harry's Gryffindor captain," Hermione told the confused girl. "Of course he'll be the Seeker."

"I'm the co-captain, Hermione," Harry said modestly. "Anyways, I'm just glad to be playing again."

"You're so certain that your ban will be lifted," came the sneering voice of Draco Malfoy from the open door. Harry looked up to see Draco's sneer plastered on his face with his two bodyguards, Goyle and Crabbe, at his side. "I am positive that it was a life ban."

"And I'm positive that none of Umbridge's "changes" will be upheld," Hermione retorted.

"If you say so, mudblood," he said with a smirk. Ron nearly jumped at the boy, but Hermione held him down.

"Shut up, Draco," Sephra snapped at her cousin.

"And why should I?" he asked fingering his wand delicately. Harry noticed as Sephra swallowed slightly.

"Because, I'll tell everyone what Sephra just finished telling us," Harry responded. "That you still sleep with a teddy bear."

"I do not!" Draco yelled at Harry defensively.

"A little guilty there, Draco?" Ron asked, enjoying Draco's discomfort.

"I am not," Draco said panicking. "If that damn girl has been lying to you, I'll need to deal with her!" he said pulling his wand out and pointing it at her. Harry beat Draco to the draw and had his wand under Draco's throat.

"What's going on here, dears?" a kind voice asked. Harry saw that it belonged to the witch who pushed the lunch cart.

"Nothing, ma'am," Sephra answered quickly. Draco and his cronies stalked down the hall as Harry and his friends burst into raucous laughter. Harry bought everyone lunch. They talked idly about this and that. Sephra had a lot of questions and they were more than willing to answer them.

"So what's the transfiguration teacher like?" Sephra asked curiously. "That's my second favorite class."

"Professor McGonagall, well, she's strict," Ginny answered. "But fair. She doesn't treat you any different if you're a Gryffindor or a Ravenclaw or a Hufflepuff or a Slytherin."

"Unlike some," Harry muttered under his breath. Sephra gave him a quizzical glance. "Professor Snape, head of the Slytherin house, is a biased git."

"And that's putting it nicely," Ron told her. "I wouldn't have used those words."

“What does he teach?” she asked them.

“Potions,” Hermione told her simply.

“Oh, no,” Sephra said softly. “That’s my favorite class.”

“Won’t be for long,” Ron said pessimistically.

Harry turned the conversation away from Snape. He didn’t really feel like talking about the man he blamed for part of Sirius’ death. Why hadn’t Snape taught him Occulmency properly or at least showed some recognition back in Umbridge’s office?

“What house do you want to be in?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Sephra said thoughtfully. “My parents were both in Slytherin and they turned out all right. But I don’t want to be in the same house as Draco.”

“You could be a Gryffindor,” Hermione offered. “We’re all Gryffindors here and you fit in nicely.”

“I don’t know,” Sephra replied with a shrug. “I’ll just wait to see what happens.”

They talked about all of the different Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers they had had over the years. Sephra got a kick out of Professor Lockhart and sympathized with them over Umbridge’s stupidity. The conversation wandered on from there and the afternoon started to slip towards evening.

At one point, the bracelet Sephra was wearing caught Ginny’s eyes. “That’s beautiful!”

“Thanks. My mum gave it to me for my fifteenth birthday,” she explained. Sephra let Ginny look at it and Harry peered over Ginny’s shoulder. It was a simple chain with large silver links. The chain had to be old, because it was worn and tarnished in several places. There were several charms on it, some obviously new and others obviously old. There was one of a Snitch with outstretched wings and another

of a quodball. Another said “peace” over a strange multi-colored symbol and yet another said “princess” in pink glittering script. The last one Harry could see was in the shape of a crown and had a half white, half red rose in its center.

“I like that one the best,” Ginny said pointing to a muggle charm of a red sports car. “I want dad to get a car like that.”

“My best friend, Kelsey, gave that one to me,” Sephra told them quietly. “We both wanted red convertibles. We planned to cruise the Washington coast in them. Guess that won’t be happening.”

“Which charms did your mum give you?” Hermione asked politely.

“These ones,” she said pointing to the sport related ones and the crown, along with several others. “My dad gave me the princess one, ‘cause he said I was his princess.” She slipped into deep thought. Harry turned to look out the window and was surprised to see how close they were to Hogwarts.

“It’ll be another hour, I’d guess,” he told the group. Ron got out the chessboard and he proceeded to trounce Harry at a game.

“You don’t play very good,” Sephra remarked with a chuckle.

“Yeah, I know,” Harry grumbled. “You wouldn’t believe how many times I get that. Even I’m not sure how often.”

“Do you want to play?” Ron asked her. Sephra nodded and they started a fierce game. They hadn’t finished their game by the time the Hogwarts Express arrived at the Hogsmeade station. They slipped into their robes and headed off the train. Harry was immensely glad to be back.

Chapter Eight: Professor Black

I pictured I could bring you back.
I pictured I could turn back time.
'Cuz I can't find my way.
I just can't find my way.
Without you I just can't find my way.
Simple Plan: Perfect World

Harry got off the train and listened for a moment, hoping to hear a familiar voice.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!" Harry smiled and waved to Hagrid.
"How yeh doin', Harry?"

"Fine, Hagrid! See you at the Feast?" Harry hadn't seen Hagrid all summer. It looked like he was in one piece, but there was one large bruise on his face.

"Yeah." He turned to the timid first years and started shouting again,
"C'mon, follow me! Firs' years follow me!"

"Miss Carrigan, could you please come here. I need to talk with you.!"
Harry heard a very familiar voice shout over the noise.

"Who's that?" Sephra asked him.

"Oh, that's Professor McGonagall," Harry informed her quietly. "She's deputy headmistress. You should hurry up, you don't want to keep her waiting." Sephra hurried over to talk to the older woman.

"Let's get a carriage and get up to the Great Hall," Ron said to the group. "The Sorting can't start 'til everyone's there; and the feast can't start 'til the Sorting's done."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ron, but Harry nodded and the four of them grabbed a carriage. They were surprised to find Neville already in it.

"Hey, Neville," Hermione greeted the reserved boy.

“Hey, Hermione. Everyone. How was your summer?” he asked absentmindedly.

“Oh, it was alright, yours?” Harry asked. There was something different about Neville, but he couldn’t seem to place it.

“Oh, it was good. Did loads of stuff,” he replied waving his hand dismissively.

They talked all the way to school, but Neville hardly added a word to the conversation. Harry could definitely tell something was up with him.

Once they arrived at the front entrance, they all got out and hurried into the Great Hall. It was breathtaking, as always. The wonderful hangings with the House crests on them were swinging from the ceiling. Hundreds of candles were floating several feet above the tables. The gold plates and cutlery that they used for feasts were glistening in the candlelight. Harry once again realized how much he had missed Hogwarts.

“Where are those pip squeaks?” Ron asked as his stomach growled.

“Ron, they aren’t pip squeaks.” Hermione scolded.

“If you say so, ‘Mione. But I just want the feast to start. I’m starving”

As Ron finished saying this, the first years were lead into the Great Hall and up to the front by Professor McGonagall. She left and returned with the Sorting hat. Everyone stared at the beat-up old hat, the first years completely confused. Suddenly, the flap near the brim opened and started to sing:

“Where to start, where to start?

The beginning would be best!

And yet, that story I’ve told before,

Of brave Gryffindor,

Of sweet Hufflepuff,

Of bright Ravenclaw,

Of shrewd Slytherin.

And so I'll start a different tale,

One not told so often.

Years ago, the house feuds

Were not as they are now.

Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw versus

Gryffindor and Slytherin.

And yet, the feud was only friendly banter.

Slytherins and Gryffindors

Better friends you couldn't find

Or maybe it was,

Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs,

It is hard to say!

But today the feuds have changed.

Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw

All against poor Slytherin.

And the feud is no longer

The friendly banter of old.

No! Now it is vicious,

Now it is cruel duels when

The teachers' backs are turned.

And yet I can't help but think,

Of those poor Slytherins:

What did they ever do?

Only few are evil like most think,

And each house has the same number

Of those who serve a different master.

Please, please take heed my warning.

Ignoring this plea, as you did last year's,

Will only result in this school's end.

Please, please take heed my warning.

Not all are to be hated,

Not all are to be trusted.

Make your choice, but please,

Do not base it on which house

I am obligated by bonds of old

To sort that person into."

Everyone stared at the hat as its flap closed again and it remained silent. Dumbledore started to clap and the other teachers followed his lead. Most of the students clapped too, but there was a buzz created by their whispering and speculations.

"When I call your name," Professor McGonagall said over the whispering, "please come forward and place the hat on top of your head. Once you have been sorted, please head to your assigned house table." She took out a long list of names and read the first one off, "Baker, Carry."

A short girl with long black hair hurried forward. She placed the hat on and sat patiently. But it was only a moment before the hat yelled, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry clapped with the rest of the house, but his mind was elsewhere. What had the hat meant? What did it know that the rest of them didn't?

"Brown, Kevin!"

"That's my brother," Harry heard Lavender whisper to Parvati.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Good job, Kev!" Lavender said, patting her brother on the back.

The Sorting went on and on and, in Harry and Ron's opinion, took forever. They started playing Hangman and Tic-Tac-Toe to pass the time before the feast. This earned several disapproving looks from Hermione, but they just ignored her. Finally, "Zerman, Jessica!" was sorted into, "RAVENCLAW!" and the Sorting was finished.

"If I could have everyone's attention?" Dumbledore needlessly asked once McGonagall had removed the Sorting Hat. "We still need the Sorting Hat for one more Sorting. We have a new student for our sixth years to meet. I thought it would be rude to not give her the same chance to be sorted as you all have had. So, please, Professor McGonagall, could you bring the Sorting Hat back out?" She came

back with the hat and placed it back into the middle. "Miss Sephra Carrigan, would you please place the hat on your head."

Harry saw Sephra for the first time, since entering, off to the side of the Hall as she made her way towards the hat. There was some whispering, for new students above the first year were extremely rare. She sat down and placed the Sorting Hat on her head. Everyone waited patiently for the hat to make up its mind. It seemed that it was a hard choice. Finally with little confidence in its loud voice it shouted, "SLYTHERIN!" and Sephra walked slowly to the table that was clapping for her.

"Miss Carrigan," Dumbledore continued, "has come from the United States to attend Hogwarts. I'm sure she'd be more than willing to tell you all about it and I'm sure you all will make her feel welcomed. I think I will save the rest of my notices until after the feast. Enjoy!" He sat down and everyone started to heap the food in front of them onto their plates.

"Well, she turned out to be a true Malfoy after all," Ron said sadly. He had liked her.

"So what if she's a Slytherin, we all know she's nice and not like that. And the Sorting Hat's right, we shouldn't be so biased," Hermione said patiently.

"She's still a Slytherin and a Malfoy," Ron stated as if this made the most sense.

"I thought her last name was Carrigan," Dean Thomas inquired.

"Yeah, it is," Ginny answered. "But her mum was Lucius Malfoy's sister and Sephra's stuck living with them 'cause her parents were killed." She turned to her brother and asked, "And Ron, what does it matter if she's in that house?"

"It matters 'cause by the end of the week she'll be hexing all of us to smithereens just for the fun of it," he answered between mouthfuls.

"Ron, don't be so childish," Hermione scolded him.

“Hey, Hermione, are you and Ron going out?” Parvati asked her.

“Yeah. About time he asked me out, don’t you think?”

“I wish she wouldn’t talk about me as if I weren’t here, mate,” Ron complained to Harry.

“So what? It is the truth,” Harry said unsympathetically to Ron. “I think we should still be nice to Sephra. Even if she’s in the Slytherin house, we all know she’s completely against Voldemort,” many of the people listening shivered, but Harry just rolled his eyes. “That had to have been a horrible summer holiday, stuck at the Malfoy Manor. And now she’s stuck in Slytherin with Draco.”

Harry’s statement seemed to end that conversation. Seamus, Dean, Ron, and Ginny started to talk about the Holyhead Harpies and Hermione started to talk to Lavender and Parvati about Ron. Harry just ate and listened, watching Ginny from the corner of his eye. He had wanted to ask her out for a week or two now, but every time he gathered his courage, he chickened out. To make matters worse, he couldn’t ask Ron for advice, because it was his sister Harry wanted to ask out.

Harry wasn’t sure how Ron would react if they started to date. Harry had thought he would like it, but with the way Ron acted that first morning at the Burrow, Harry wasn’t sure anymore. Harry watched Dean talk to Ginny. They had broken up soon after school got out. Seamus let it slip that Dean had a girlfriend at home and Ginny had been furious. But it seemed that Ginny had forgiven him.

Harry’s eyes wandered over to the students from other houses. There was Susan Bones from Hufflepuff talking with Hannah Abbott. It seemed that Michael Corner and Cho Chang were still going out. And there was Sephra, sitting with Blaise Zabini. She looked completely bored and sad. Draco was sitting several seats down and he was ignoring his cousin.

Soon the meal was over and everyone sat back stuffed. Dumbledore stood up again and raised his hands for quiet. The Hall became silent

and he started to speak. "Another year has come, and my, has the summer flown by. Mr. Filch would," Harry leaned his chair back and closed his eyes barely paying attention, "like me to tell you all that all but a few of the Weasley Wizarding Wheezes products are illegal on school grounds and if caught with any of said contraband you will be punished severely. I must, though, assure you that he will not be hanging you up by your toes, as he wanted to do."

There were a few nervous laughs and Harry, Ron, and Ginny gave each other worried looks. All three of them had trunks filled with WWW stuff. Harry shrugged and Ginny whispered, "Oh well."

"Also, I would like to remind everyone that the Forbidden Forest, is just that, forbidden. If any of you would like to know why, please go visit Dolores Umbridge at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. She is currently in the closed ward though, so you may have a hard time reaching her." Harry closed his eyes once again. He was hoping to catch a quick nap.

"And speaking of last year's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher's unfortunate demise, I would like to introduce you to your new one. Professor Black." Harry lost the balance of his chair in surprise and fell backwards, hitting his head hard on the floor. Ron, Dean, and Seamus started laughing hard at him, as were many others. "Mr. Potter, are you quite all right?" Dumbledore asked with a slight smile on his lips.

"Yeah...yes, sir." Harry mumbled as he picked up his chair. He had been positive that Dumbledore had introduced Sirius, but that couldn't be, he was dead. He wasn't coming back. He couldn't come back, no matter what Harry wanted. And even if he could, Sirius couldn't be a teacher.

As soon as he was sitting again, Harry looked up to the teacher's table for the first time that night. There was Hagrid at the end, laughing but looking a little worried; Harry smiled at him. Down a ways was Professor Flitwick and he was brushing tears of laughter from his eyes. Sitting a few seats away from him was Snape, who had a large smirk on his face; Harry glared at him. Sitting next to him was Professor McGonagall who was looking at him sternly but

concern filled her eyes. Next to her was Dumbledore, with that slight smile on his face and twinkle in his eyes. And next to him was:

“As I was saying before Mr. Potter fell, this is Professor Black. She will be teaching you all everything you will need to learn for the future. I hope...”

“Harry, your head is bleeding,” Hermione said a little too loudly in the silent hall. Harry felt the back of his head and his fingers came away bloody. He just rolled his eyes and shrugged. He’d be spending the night in the hospital wing if Madam Pomfrey had her way.

“Mr. Potter, do you need to leave?” Dumbledore asked, his smile growing.

“No, sir. I’ll wait until you dismiss everyone. It’s not bleeding too hard.” Dumbledore nodded and continued.

“Professor Black was an Auror, before going undercover. I must ask you all not to ask her too many questions about her past, for she can’t tell you much. Alas, most of her best stories are classified, so you will miss many good ones. One thing that I should add is that Professor Black is the sister of one of your previous DADA professors: Professor Lupin’s to be precise and is not in any way, shape, or form a werewolf. Am I missing anything, Synthia?”

She winced at the use of her full name but said in a calm, confident voice, “No, nothing else.”

“Very well then, off to bed. Tomorrow’s a busy day. Mr. Potter, I’m sure Professor McGonagall will walk you up to the hospital wing.”

Harry glared at Hermione. “Couldn’t you have healed it and then I wouldn’t have to go up there?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be so loud,” Hermione apologized as McGonagall showed up to lead Harry up to the hospital wing.

At the infirmary, Madame Pomfrey was more than a little angry at seeing Harry so soon this year. “My goodness, Mr. Potter. Barely

here for more than three hours and you've already managed to get yourself in here. This is going to sting," she said as she applied a cleaning potion to the cut. It wasn't just a little sting, but Harry kept his mouth shut. "I've never had a student who ended up here so often. Never in the thirty years I've worked here! Don't move your head, dear, I'm going to heal it now." She said a spell and Harry felt his skin pull together.

"Now I'm going to have to get all of that dried blood out of your hair. You should have come up here the second you cut it open. I don't know what the Headmaster was thinking. Letting you stay down there injured. He should have sent you up to me immediately." She was rubbing his scalp far harder than she needed, but Harry didn't complain. He didn't want to stay up here longer than necessary.

"Now, how do you feel?" she asked him, walking around to face him.

"I just have a headache," he answered her truthfully.

"Then I'll go get you something for that, just wait a second." Harry was about to stop her, but she was gone before he could. She came back with a smoking goblet. "Drink it all and then I'll let you go." Harry swallowed it quickly and then left the hospital wing. He was thankful that he hadn't needed to spend the night there.

He arrived in front of the Fat Lady, when he realized he hadn't found out the password from Professor McGonagall before she had left him. He stood staring at the Fat Lady blankly. What should he do?

"Madame," he said politely to her. She looked at him surprised. "What do I do if I wasn't told the password?"

"Talk to Professor McGonagall," she said in her prim voice. Harry cursed his luck and headed down to McGonagall's office. She told him to enter once he knocked.

"What do you need, Mr. Potter?" she asked him.

"I wasn't told the password," he told her softly. He yawned; he had gotten tired suddenly. It must be a side effect of the headache potion.

“The password is ‘WWW,’” she told him. “I believe it stands for Weasley Wizarding Wheezes, but I’m not quite positive about that.”

Harry nodded and slowly walked the many stairs back to the portrait of the Fat Lady. Once he was there, he gave her the password and entered the common room. It was empty. He tiredly walked toward the stairs leading up to his dorm. He tripped over several stairs as he climbed up the stone stairwell. He couldn’t make his feet lift high enough to get up and over each step.

Finally, he reached the dorm and saw the other boys were already asleep. He got into his pajamas and climbed onto the bed. He was asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

Chapter Nine: Photos on a Wall

But I know I must go on.
Although I hurt, I must be strong.
Because inside I know that many feel this way.
Creed: Don't Stop Dancing

Harry woke up the next morning groggy from the potion Madame Pomfrey had given him. He put on his glasses and looked at his watch. It was 8:09; he had less than 10 minutes to get down to breakfast with just enough time to eat before classes began.

He glanced at the empty beds of his dorm mates and scowled. The least one of them could have done was wake him. He grabbed a pair of robes and took a quick shower. He hurried down the stairs into the common room and found it as empty as he had expected. He ran out of the entrance and down the flight of stairs until he was on the ground floor. He checked his watch: 8:21. He had nine minutes to eat breakfast and get his books for the first class.

As Harry hurried across the Entrance Hall, Hermione and Ron exited the Great Hall. They spotted him and hurried over to him. "There you are, Harry. We were getting worried," Hermione said as they reached each other.

"You won't guess what we have first every Monday," Ron said gloomily. Harry shook his head; he didn't have time to guess. "Potions, with Snape." Harry groaned; that was just what he needed. It was a great way to start the week.

"Go eat something, Harry. Ron will grab the books you need for the morning," Hermione said hurrying up the stairs.

"Which means I have your schedule. I hope you don't mind that I took it from McGonagall," Ron said before following Hermione up the stairs.

Harry glanced at his watch. It was now 8:25. He had five minutes before the bell would ring for classes. Harry ran into the Great Hall and took the first open seat at the Gryffindor table. He grabbed some toast and dished up some porridge. He was starving, which was odd

because he had stuffed himself full last night. Because he was so hungry, he ate everything quickly.

“There you are, Harry,” Ginny said, coming up to him from where she had been sitting. “We were wondering if you were going to wake up in time for class. Did you see Ron and Hermione?” Harry nodded his head and took a swig of pumpkin juice. “I see that you’re hungry,” she commented with a laugh. Harry scowled at her, but his mouth full of toast ruined the effect. She laughed harder. “Ron said that he had tried to wake you up, but you wouldn’t. He left thinking that Madam Pomfrey gave you something that knocked you out. If he would have known that you wouldn’t...”

“Brrrrriinnnnnggg!” The bell signaling the start of passing time cut Ginny off.

“I’ll talk to you at lunch,” she said before leaving. Harry took one more gulp of juice and exited the Hall. He caught sight of Hermione and Ron heading down the stairs from Gryffindor Tower and he pushed his way to meet them. They headed down the stairs, Ron handing him his book bag and schedule.

“So, you and I have every class together,” Ron said as they filed down into the dungeons. “But Miss Smarty-pants, here, is taking Ancient Rune instead of Herbology, so we only have a few classes with her.”

They entered the Potion classroom and took a seat at the back. Just a minute later the bell rang to signal the start of class. Professor Snape entered the room from his office door. There was instant quiet, but he felt compelled to say, “Quiet!”

“I welcome all of you to N.E.W.T. level Potions,” he said mockingly in his oily voice. Harry could already tell that Mondays would be his least favorite day. “There were several surprises this past summer. Several of you managed to gain the necessary O.W.L score to gain admission into this N.E.W.T level class,” he said glaring at Harry, “Quite astounding, considering many of you never showed any aptitude before. I must say, that normally such scores as those gained by two particular people,” (Two people, Harry thought, who is

the other?) “would have amazed and delighted me. But, instead, I find myself more than a little disappointed in the two of them. Mr. Potter and Mr. Longbottom, I want both of you to work to your full potential.” Harry stared over at the slouched frame that belonged to Neville. It seemed both of them worked better without Snape breathing down their necks.

“Now, in this class we will study the antidotes for some the most dangerous poisons. Each antidote is difficult, more advanced than anything you have ever managed.” He glared at them. “Also, as I’m sure several of you have noticed, the book for this class also contains the instructions for making the poisons themselves.” Harry glanced over at Malfoy and saw the malicious smile on his face. “We will not be studying those, however. If you want to learn poisons, find another teacher at a different school.”

“The first poison is, in my opinion, the worst in that book. Not because it causes death. No, for very few people actually die from it. Instead, it cause immense pain, pain that I am told rivals the pain caused by the Cruciatus.” Harry would have to agree with Snape on this, if that poison could cause pain as strong as the Cruciatus then it had to be bad. “The pain goes on and on until the victim is fed the antidote or given a mercy stroke.” There were a few murmurs of confusion.

“Professor Snape,” one of the Ravenclaw girls asked calmly, “what do you mean by mercy stroke?” Harry glanced at his cauldron intently , he had an idea of what it meant.

“It means, Miss Fawcett, that those who administered the poison to the victim or the victim’s allies killed the person out of mercy, for any number of reasons.” Sarah Fawcett paled considerably, along with many of the other students. That was what Harry thought he had meant.

“That is also the reason why I expect you to memorize every step and ingredient for this antidote by the end of next week. You would not remember this, but this poison was a favorite of the Death Eaters. If you know the antidote, you will not have to cut the throat of a friend.” Several people shuddered and Harry knew he was trying to scare

them. He couldn't help but wonder if the poison was simmering in Snape's personal rooms to be used on some poor person.

"Now, you'll find everything you'll need in the cupboards and the instructions both in your books and on the board. Begin."

After fifteen minutes, Harry reached a point where he had to wait for the potion to simmer on low heat. He took out his schedule and looked at it.

Monday:

Double Potions

Charms

Lunch

Transfiguration

Double Defense Against the Dark Arts (D.A.D.A.)

Well, the end of the day would be good. He had a feeling that Professor Black would be an excellent teacher.

Tuesday:

Care of Magical Creatures

Double Herbology

Lunch

D.A.D.A.

Double Charms

Tuesday was better than Monday was for there were no Potion periods. And he had Defense again.

“Mr. Potter, I would suggest you take care of your potion and not read notes in my class. I will be forced to take points from the Gryffindors, otherwise and we all know how I hate that.” Harry scowled at Snape, but turned back to the potion. He needed to let it simmer for another three minutes.

At the end of the double period, Snape asked for their homework from over the summer. Harry looked through his bag, but it wasn't in there. “Hey, Ron, did you grab my Potion essay?”

Ron looked at him guiltily and shook his head no. Harry sighed and looked up at Snape. He had actually finished that essay at the Dursleys and now he was going to get yelled at, just because that potion Madam Pomfrey gave him kept him from waking up on time. Sometimes the irony of his life made him sick.

“Professor Snape,” Harry said walking up to his desk in the front. “I woke up late this morning and...”

“And didn't have time to write it at breakfast? Mr. Potter, you disappoint me.”

“No, I woke up late because Madam Pomfrey gave me a head ache potion that knocked me out. Ron went back to our dorm to get my stuff so that I could eat. He forgot to grab it.” By now the room was empty except for Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

“Never your fault is it, Potter?” Snape whispered menacingly. “I would have thought that causing the death of the mutt would have ingrained some sense of responsibility in you. But I see now that this is not the case.”

“Snape,” Harry started, but he was interrupted.

“Professor Snape, Potter.”

“Then it's Mr. Potter, Professor Snape. As I was saying, if you would just allow me to hand it to you at lunch, I would be grateful.” Harry stared into Snape's eyes, not caring about Snape's Legilimency skills.

Finally, Snape answered in a whisper for the room was filling up with fifth year students, "Because the Headmaster has asked me to be kinder to you ungrateful Gryffindors," "I will allow this to go. Hand it in promptly at lunch. If it isn't the first thing you do, I will give you a zero. Now go, before you're late."

By the time the three of them arrived at Charms, they were five minutes late. They told Professor Flitwick where they had been and he told them to take a seat. Harry enjoyed Professor Flitwick's classes: he was a cheerful man and a very good teacher. The bell for the end of class rang and Harry sprinted up the stairs to get his essay. He didn't want to give Snape any reason to mark it down. He grabbed it and then sprinted down to the Great Hall. Well, he thought to himself, at least my running over the summer has come in handy.

He walked up to the teacher's table between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables in the middle of the Hall. He wasn't even breathing hard as the bell rang to signal the start of lunch. He reached the table and waited in front of the spot normally occupied by Snape. It seemed that he hadn't arrived yet from his class.

"Hello, Harry," a calm voice said a few spots away. Harry turned and saw Professor Black sitting there.

"Hello, Professor Black." Harry watched a shadow pass her face and wondered if Sirius had died thinking that she was dead.

"Please, Harry, call me Thia out of class. I was wondering how your head was." Harry looked at her confused and then remembered about his injury.

"Nothing Madam Pomfrey couldn't mend and all there was after was a head ache." Harry smiled at her and continued, "Professor Dumbledore just surprised me. I thought I knew his speech by heart, but I guess not. I didn't know your last name was Black."

"Potter," Snape's oily voice came from behind him. "I hope you didn't skip your last class so that you could beat me here." Harry handed him the essay.

"No, sir. I ran to the Tower and then to the Hall. Well, here it is, sir, and thank you for allowing me to hand it in late," Harry said politely. He felt that he should try to keep Snape as happy as possible.

"Yes, very well." He didn't seem very happy with the thank you though.

"Good bye, Thia. Thank you for your concern."

"No problem, Harry. Have a good lunch and I'll see you later this afternoon."

Lunch went by in a whirl. He talked with Ron and Hermione about their schedule. It seemed they had every class together on Mondays, but after that they only had two subjects together on each of the other days. They had every Defense class together, but that was the only class. Harry had no idea how he was going to get through Potions without her.

The bell rang and they headed off to Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall was her normal strict self and got them right to work. This year they would be studying human transformation, with a small section on the Animagus Transformation.

"What is the difference," she asked the class, "between a human transformation and an Animagus Transformation?" To no one's surprise Hermione's hand was the first in the air. "Miss Granger?"

"An animagus transformation is limited to one shape and can be done without a wand once the wizard or witch accomplishes the first transformation. Also, it is very difficult and few actually study that branch of Transfiguration. On the other hand, human transformations can take on just about any shape, as long as the caster knows the correct spell. You must always use a wand to perform one of these transformations. Also, for a competent witch or wizard it is rather easy once they get the hang of it." And as usual Hermione sounded exactly like a textbook.

"Very good, Miss Granger. Five points to Gryffindor. You will be learning how to change the human body into something else. Our

study on the Animagus Transformation will be brief, but slightly more in depth than our study in your third year.” They went through theory until the bell sounded for the end of class. “Please read the first chapter for your next Transfiguration period. You are dismissed.”

The sixth years hurried to their first Defense Against the Dark Arts class. The third and seventh years had been praising her teaching style at lunch. It seemed every sixth year that was allowed to continue with the class was waiting outside the door. “What’s the matter?” Hermione asked taking over the situation as a Perfect.

“We don’t know if we should enter,” Susan Bones said from the front of the pack. Harry rolled his eyes and pushed his way through the pack. He got to the door and opened it. Sitting calmly at the front of the room was Professor Black.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Potter,” she said looking up. Harry walked to the front of the room and saved two seats for Ron and Hermione.

“Good afternoon, Professor Black.”

“You have quite a following,” she laughed. Harry turned around and saw that the pack had filtered in after him. Several were even surprised that she and Harry knew each other already.

Harry turned back and smiled at her. “Well, you could say that. It seems you have outranked a certain... greasy... professor as the most feared. They were standing outside waiting for some sign to let them know that they could enter.”

“Please, you flatter me. I have done nothing, yet, to deserve that title. Please, give it back to the... greasy... professor.” Now the students were staring, several laughed, and the Slytherins were scowling. Snape would find out about this from them. “Please, class, don’t get comfortable. We will be moving to another room. Bring your stuff along; this will be last time we use this classroom.” She led them out of the room with Harry, Ron, and Hermione right behind her.

They entered the last classroom on the hallway and she headed to the front where her desk sat. It was a large classroom; the largest

Harry had never been in. The desks were lined up along three of the sides and her desk was along the fourth. In the middle was a large open area. "Please take a seat." Harry grabbed a seat near her desk and Ron and Hermione sat on either side of him.

"Welcome to the D.A.D.A. Sixth Year Classroom." She waved her wand and a large sign appeared at the head of the classroom saying just that. "This means, you are allowed to decorate it in anyway you want, within reason. And the bookshelves must stay, along with the books on them," she said with a sly smile. Harry sat with the windows at his back and to the left of the door. There was a large window behind Thia's desk, so this classroom must be in a corner. The wall opposite him was lined with bookshelves that were filled with what seemed like hundreds of books. On the wall with the door hung several maps. There was a blank spot on that wall next to the door. "I also recommend that the maps stay, but if you really want them to disappear, they will."

"Now, onto business," she said smartly, for everyone was now sitting. "You are here to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts. I don't want to state the obvious, but you will need it. I was sitting in desks very much like the ones you are sitting in now during the first rise of Voldemort." The customary shiver went through the room, with a few muffled screams. "Please, control yourselves and get used to the name. Does anyone know what the idiot's strongest weapon is?"

"Do you mean You-Know-Who?" a Hufflepuff Harry didn't recognize asked.

"Yes, I am referring to that idiot. Now, can anyone tell me his most powerful weapon?" There was silence as everyone thought for a moment.

"The Killing Curse?" someone asked. Thia shook her head.

"The Cruciatus Curse?" Hermione asked next to him. Once again Thia shook her head.

"The horde of monsters that he has at his disposal?" Dean asked. And yet again she shook her head.

"Mr. Potter, do you have a guess?" Harry stared at her. He didn't have to guess; he knew what the answer was. She smiled, "Let me rephrase that, what is the answer?"

Harry ran his fingers through his hair trying to find the right words. The students watched as Harry thought back to every encounter he had ever had with Voldemort. "To put it simply, fear."

"Correct. In many ways those three answers were right, but not in the sense you meant. Why is that?" Harry raised his hand this time. "Yes, Mr. Potter."

"Because, well, with the Killing Curse and the hordes of monsters if you ever met them you'd be dead, for sure. Unless you're cursed to be me," he added under his breath and with a slight sardonic smile. "The Cruciatus Curse, well, I don't think anyone here has experienced that one, besides Neville and me."

"People don't know what to think about them: they don't know what to expect from them. So, instead, they panic and fear them. Voldemort," the shiver went through the class again, "doesn't even need to use them, he already beats people with their fear. He doesn't even need to be present to cause fear, someone simply using his name causes everyone within hearing distance to cringe," he added contemptuously. He thought for a moment. "No, it's not entirely right, about fear I mean. It's more like fear for the unknown that is his strongest weapon."

Thia looked at him sadly. "It is too bad that you should know that, Mr. Potter. There are many adults who do not have the experience you do with the Dark Lord and they fought during the First War. But you are correct with the change. It is fear of the unknown that makes Voldemort," this time she rolled her eyes at the shiver, "so strong."

She looked at them sadly and then continued, "As I said earlier, I was a student during the first rise. I watched as families were torn apart because fathers and/or mothers refused to serve him. Or were torn apart because fathers and/or mothers served him. Or sons and/or daughters fought and were killed and others served the Dark Lord

and were killed. My friends lost older siblings or even younger siblings caught in the crossfire. I lost my parents and my best friends lost theirs. Some lost sweethearts, others lost fiancées.” She had been pacing in the middle of the room not really looking at the students. She stopped and looked at each of the students before continuing.

“Then we passed our N.E.W.T.’s and were sent out into the world to do as we wished. My class in particular was very involved with the war. We either became Aurors, Healers, or gave loads of time and money to the resistance, or became Death Eaters, spouses of Death Eaters, or gave loads of time and money to their cause. Because of this, very few in my class are alive to this day. Many paid the ultimate price for their convictions, whether they were right or wrong. Several are in Azkaban with life sentences. Others are forever on the Closed Ward because of injuries that they survived.” She rubbed her hand across her face; everyone could see the amount of loss on her face. “Others, live, but must live with betrayals against their first allegiances. Some were on our side, but then they turned against us. Others were supporters of Voldemort, but then turned against him. Now they all must live with the choices that they have made and the actions that they have chosen.”

She turned her back to them and looked out the window behind her desk. “Others were accused of crimes they never committed. Several people were sent to Azkaban innocent of all charges against them,” Harry knew that she was talking about Sirius, “and Death Eaters were killed because their master lost confidence in their loyalty.”

“But, Professor, isn’t that a good thing?” a Ravenclaw asked from beside the door.

“Loss of any life is always a tragedy,” she informed them sadly. “But if I must choose between their lives and that of an innocent bystander or an Auror, I would choose to take theirs. And I have, unfortunately, had to make that choice.” She closed her eyes and then turned to face them.

“I believe in what the Sorting Hat said. ‘Only few are evil like most think, and each house has the same number of those who serve a

different master.' Each house has those that someday will choose the wrong path. A good friend of mine took the wrong path. He betrayed my best friend and her husband and Voldemort killed them. He was a Gryffindor.

"The best Auror I've ever worked with was a Slytherin. And it wasn't because he knew every Dark spell, because there were times were I thought I knew more, but because he could think several steps ahead and see the solutions to problems that no one else could solve. He was a Slytherin in the truest meaning of the word." She looked out the windows behind Harry and waited.

"What house were you in, Professor?"

She smiled at the Gryffindors, who had sat on the same side as Harry. "I was a Gryffindor, as was my brother, all of my friends with one or two exceptions, and all of my brother's friends." She walked up to the front of the room and sat on the front of her desk.

"Eventually, we will get to one-on-one duels. That is why we have such a large room and such a large empty spot." She motioned to the area in front of her. "But first, we must plug the gaps created by the inconsistent teaching patterns. It will take a month or two, but we should manage it. I will also give you the whole class next Tuesday to decorate the room. Please have your ideas ready and all supplies here by lunch that day. I would suggest you use that open spot there," she said pointing to the spot near the door, "to place photos of those you or your family have lost. My class had the same opportunity and it was a good thing. Though, in my opinion it was too crowded. Please, let me stress, they do not have to be dead and they do not have to be on the side of light. They could only have suffered a scratch. Or they could have been a Death Eater, for all I care. And as long as you don't pick a picture of them in their robes, no one will know the difference. Mr. Potter, what are you doing?" Harry had been scrambling in his bag searching for the photo of his mum and dad and the photo of Sirius. He was now walking toward that bare space on the wall.

"I was just thinking that that idea was a good one and I wanted to put up my first two pictures." He reached the wall and took out his wand.

After a simple sticking charm, they were up there. This picture of his parents was his favorite one. They were in a village and it was snowing. His father was behind Lily and had his arms around her. They were smiling and waving at those looking at the photo. The picture of Sirius was one from his school days. No one would be able to recognize him as the man who had escaped from Azkaban. A hand was placed on his shoulder and he realized tears were silently falling from his face.

"Where did you get that photo of Lily and James?" she asked curiously. "Oh, never mind, not now. I wonder if you even know the story behind it." Harry shook his head then headed back to his seat. No one was looking at him. He wondered what Malfoy would say at supper that night. He probably would say something along the lines that he was a crybaby. Harry sat down and noticed that Sephra had also stood. She had a photo in her hands and sobs shook her body, but no sound came out. She walked over to the wall and placed a picture with three people in it next to Harry's. Then she went back to her seat. Now several others were getting up and following their example. Harry was surprised at how many there were and so was Thia. She had not expected this. It had taken weeks for that wall to catch on when her class did it. But, here were 17 students with pictures in their bags of loved ones lost.

"It is too bad that your generation was so affected by Voldemort. And I hate to be the bearer of bad news," she said over the bell. The students returned to their seats and she started again. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but welcome to the Second War." And she swept out of the room. As Harry passed the wall he looked at the pictures. The people were waving and smiling. None of them would know that sometime after their picture was taken they would meet some unfortunate event, many even dying.

Harry saw his mother, father, and Godfather staring at him and waving. And right next to them was the picture Sephra put up. There was a man, a woman, and a young boy standing happily in front of a mountain with several heads on it. But it wasn't that mountain that caught Harry's eyes. No, it was the adults. He had watched them die earlier that summer. He had watched as Sephra's parents were murdered.

He felt his anger rise. Sometime soon Voldemort would have to pay for all these ruined lives. Professor Black was right, it was just sad that 17 students could put up photos just like that. And Harry knew that more would be added tomorrow, from those who didn't have photos with them. Voldemort would pay for this.

Chapter Ten: Screams of the Dead

Yes, there's times when I've been afraid
And there's no harm in that, I pray,
'Cuz I'm more frightened every day
That someone will take the hope I have away.
Matchbox Twenty: Stop

At supper just minutes later, all the sixth years could talk about was their Defense class. They were impressed with her teaching style and slightly startled by what she had said. Her speech had brought home to them the fact that they were at war and what being at war really meant.

"Did you hear her say that only a few of her classmates are alive?" Parvati said quietly to the others.

"Yeah. I wonder who they are," Lavender asked them.

"Well, Professor Snape, her, Professor Lupin, Wormtail, two Aurors on the Closed Ward, and I think it was two Death Eaters in Azkaban," Harry answered what Lavender had thought was a rhetorical question. Everyone looked at him.

"Where do you know Professor Black from Harry? And why did she recognize that photo you put up?" Dean asked the question they all wanted answered.

"I met her this summer at my birthday party," Harry answered once he swallowed his food. "She was a surprise for Remus and he was there, so Professor Dumbledore brought her to the Weasleys."

"Wait, who's Remus?" Seamus asked.

"Sorry, Professor Lupin," Harry said and then took a drink of pumpkin juice.

"You call him by his first name?" a Hufflepuff sixth year asked from across the space separating the tables. He saw some Ravenclaws listening in too. It seemed to be an inter-house conversation; Harry

almost invited them to sit at the Gryffindor table to make it easier on everyone.

“Yeah, they were best friends with my parents at Hogwarts. That’s why Remus was at my birthday party.” He took a bite of the chicken leg and swallowed. “Everyone thought Professor Black died soon after Voldemort fell. That’s when she went undercover.”

“Do you know what that means?” a Ravenclaw asked, coming over to the Gryffindor table so as to talk with him more easily. Several others, following the Ravenclaw, also started to stand around the Gryffindor table.

“Are you kidding?” he asked surprised. “She wouldn’t even tell Remus. She said something like....” Harry couldn’t remember exactly, so looked at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny for help.

Ginny came to his rescue, “It was ‘here and there and many places in between’. And then ‘out and about’. It was really funny, ‘cause you couldn’t tell that they hadn’t seen each other in 15 odd years. She teased him as intensely as if they saw each other everyday.”

“Yeah, she called Snape a greasy Professor,” Ron said smiling.

“That’s only because she was following Harry’s lead,” Hermione chided.

“C’mon, Hermione, she married Padfoot. There’s no way she could like Snape,” Harry reasoned with her.

“Padfoot?” someone asked. Harry was surprised to see such a crowd. He needed to answer this question carefully.

“My Godfather’s nickname from when he was at school. Remus was Moony, ‘cause he was a werewolf. My dad was Prongs, ‘cause he acted all noble. My Godfather was Padfoot, ‘cause he was a mutt. And then Peter, well, he was Wormtail, and he turned out to be a rat.” Harry stabbed his chicken with his fork and cut at it viciously.

“Are you ok, Harry?” Ginny asked calmly.

"Yeah." He shook his head to clear away the anger. "Anyway, that's the only time I met Professor Black. But she was my mom's best friend and she does have a great sense of humor. As for knowing who's left from that class. Well, I asked Remus about his school days. Listening to stories about my dad and his friends and about my mom and hers. Anyways, he brought up that his class was almost gone. I asked him what he meant and he listed everyone he could think of."

"Who were the pictures of?" Susan asked.

"Well, my mom and dad. That's the picture Professor Black commented on. The other one was a picture of my Godfather. He died last June." Harry looked down at his plate. He didn't want to talk about that right now. Not with everyone listening.

It seemed that Justin Finch-Fletchley understood and asked, "Who was Wormtail and why don't you like him?"

"He's the Gryffindor Professor Black brought up, the one who betrayed his friends. Well, those friends were my parents and the reason Voldemort knew where they were hiding was because Wormtail told him. That's why I don't like him." Harry stood up and looked at the group. "You know, they asked me to start up the D.A. again. I should go talk to Professor McGonagall about that."

"No need to go anywhere, Mr. Potter. I am right here." Harry turned and saw his Head of House standing right behind him. "I was just going to ask if you wanted to talk about the D.A., but you seem to be ahead of me. Come along. We'll talk in my office."

Harry followed her to her office. The last time he had been in there was to talk about his future plans and get career advice. It seemed like ages ago. Well, he sure proved Umbridge wrong. He had surpassed even Professor Dumbledore's Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L score.

"Have a biscuit, Potter?" she asked offering him a tin.

"No, thank you. I'm full from dinner." He waited for her to get settled then asked, "What do you need to tell me?"

"For one thing, thank you for teaching those students last year. There's no way they would have scored as high as they did without your teaching." Harry nodded modestly in appreciation, but if they hadn't wanted to do it then there was nothing he could have done. It was their determination that got them their scores.

"Second, Professor Black and I will be supervising the meetings only because that is the school's rules on the matter. You will still be in charge and teaching them." Harry nodded; that was what her note had said. "Next, you must decide what room you want."

"Can we still use the Room of Requirement?" Harry asked with bated breath, not sure if they would allow it.

"You may. That would also take care of equipment and safe measures." She looked down at a piece of paper. Harry was surprised to see the original D.A. roster in her hands, complete with the title "Dumbledore's Army" on top.

"Only original members below the fifth year will be allowed. This is for several reasons," she said, and Harry shut his mouth. He had just been about to ask her why. "For one, it will make your job easier. You will be able to focus on more difficult spells and not have to worry about the younger students struggling with them. Second, it is for safety reasons. They don't have the control needed to perform the more difficult magic. And lastly, it is, once again, part of school rules." Harry nodded his head in agreement.

"Why did you guys decide to keep its original name?" Harry asked after a slight pause. Harry saw her lips curl up in what was most definitely a smile.

"Professor Dumbledore was honored and highly amused by it. It will also serve as a reminder for why the club is held."

"How?" Harry asked confused.

"It will remind you all of that horrible woman," McGonagall replied, "and the idiocy of the Ministry. Sometimes we must fight our own side when it is wrong. That is why we kept it. That and it amused us all."

"Is that everything?" Harry asked. His day was catching up to him and he just wanted to go to bed.

"Just one more thing. It has been a puzzle to us all as to how you communicated with one another," she said shaking her head. "We didn't see any of you talking regularly as would be normal for a secret organization."

Harry smiled and dug around in his bag. He found the small galleon and showed it to her. "By using this." She took it and shook her head. "When can we have our first meeting?"

"How can this be used as a means of communication? It's just a galleon." She turned it over and over in her hands.

"When can we have our first meeting?" Harry asked with a smile. Sometimes Hermione was just amazing.

"This Friday, if you want." Harry grabbed the coin, thought of the date, and tapped the coin with his wand. It glowed for a moment and then went back to be a normal galleon. The only difference was the serial number had changed to 79596 or 7 PM, 9/5/96, the time and date of the meeting.

"Amazing! I suppose this is Granger's handy work." Harry nodded. "Well, I suppose I'll see you in the Room of Requirement at seven on Friday. Good evening, Mr. Potter."

"Good evening, Professor."

Harry's Tuesday started out much better than his Monday had. His first class was Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid outside his hut. Hagrid looked slightly disappointed when they arrived. As soon as everyone arrived he called for them to come and stand around him.

"I 'ave bad news for yeh," Hagrid started out sadly. "The beasts we were goin' ter look at, ain't arrived." Hagrid shook his head. He was clearly disappointed. "I 'ad a little trouble gettin' 'em. Sorry."

"Hagrid," Hermione asked, "what are they?"

"I'm not sayin'," he answered. "I don' want ter spoil the surprise." He pulled out a crate sitting next to him. "Instead, we're goin' ter look at these. An' there's more in me 'ut."

No one stepped forward to see what he would be teaching them about. They all remembered the blast-end skrewts from their fourth year. They were small at the beginning, but still hurt when they stung, bit, or burnt you.

"C'mon, there's nothin' ter fear." Harry looked at Hagrid's beaming face and took the first few steps toward it. Finally, he stood right next to it and looked in. He saw that the crate held a tank inside which held four animals.

"Hagrid, what are those?" Harry asked with disgust.

"They're lobalugs." Hagrid was beaming at Harry and then turned to get the other crates. They were about ten inches long with an ugly rubbery snout and a huge sac on its neck. "There should be enough for ev'ryone if yeh pair up."

Hagrid gave instructions for everyone to conjure a tank or to transfigure something into one and then scoop one up and draw it. Harry and Ron were the first ones to get theirs. (Hermione was up in the castle, learning about Ancient Runes.) In the end Ron had said, "Wingardium Leviosa!" and the lobalug floated out of the crate and into their tank. Several others copied his action and soon they were all busy with their drawings.

They were interesting creatures in a way. Merepeople used them as weapons, because their sacs were filled with venom. The creatures were easily frightened and used the venom as a way to escape from harm. Soon the period was over and Ron, Neville, and Harry headed for their double Herbology class, once again without Hermione. They

saw her walking down to Hagrid's hut. Harry couldn't help but wonder what Hermione could tell them about lobalugs.

After lunch they had their second Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Everyone was excited in a subdued kind of way. Many of the students had pictures of aunts, uncles, parents, cousins, or even a few older siblings to hang on the wall. Harry had found a picture of Cedric Diggory and he was planning to add it to the wall. He was looking for a picture of Bertha Jerkins, the witch Voldemort had killed after he had destroyed her mind before Harry's fourth year. He wished he could get a picture of the old man he had watched Voldemort kill over that summer also. Harry was planning on putting every picture he found of Voldemort's victims. He had sent a letter to Remus for pictures of old Order members and classmates. He wanted everyone to see the devastation caused by Voldemort.

It took about five minutes of class time for everyone to put their pictures up but Thia let them finish before calling them to order. "The first thing we will be doing or, rather, you will doing, is taking a pre-course test." Everyone groaned.

"The last pre-course test we had was all about the Professor," Dean complained.

"That would have been Lockhart?" Everyone nodded. "Well, no fear, it is about spells, both defensive and offensive in nature. I want to know which spells you know and which you don't. I will not be grading it; it is only to help me decide where to begin. Now, take one and hand them down." She gave about half of the stack to Harry, who was sitting with his back to the window and closest to her desk (and thus farthest from the door and Wall). She gave the rest to Sephra who was sitting opposite Harry across the middle of the room.

The class passed quietly and everyone filled out the test. Harry was surprised at how many spells he knew. He hadn't realized that in five short years he had memorized over five pages, front and back, of Defense Against the Dark Arts spells. There were a few that he didn't know, but he was doing better than Ron, who kept stopping to scratch his head. He thought he was doing better than even Hermione, who was sitting on the other side of Ron. He was the first to be done and

looked around the room. His eyes rested on the Wall of Loss (as he had started to call it in his head) and sighed. So many hurt or killed. Some had sacrificed their safety for their side, others for Voldemort. One way or the other, had Voldemort not been around none of those pictures would be up.

About five minutes later, Thia realized that Harry was finished and smiled. "When you are done, please bring your test to my desk and place them in a pile right here," she said loudly, startling many. Harry got up and, thankful for being so close to her desk, put his test where she had indicated. "May I speak with you after class? It should not take long." Harry nodded and sat back down.

He still had thirty minutes of class, little under half of the period. He decided that a quick nap was in order and leaned his chair back against the windowsill. How he would regret that choice by the time he woke up.

It wasn't a vision; at least, Harry didn't think it was. He was in a dark room. The only source of light was a tiny window twenty feet above him near the ceiling. The room was a little larger than the Great Hall and so quite enormous. Harry looked around wondering what would happen next.

Then, the door, which Harry hadn't noticed until then, opened and a long line of people entered in. The first person was Sirius, followed by his parents. They didn't look as happy as they had in the photos. They seemed ragged and troubled. Possessed, even. But they were followed by Sephra's parents and younger brother. The boy and man were carrying the woman holding onto her stumps she had for arms. People, Harry recognized as dead members of the Order, were next. Witch after witch, wizard after wizard entered and started to pace around Harry in a circle. They all looked tormented, even if they didn't have any physical injuries. Sephra's mother was not the only person without limbs and her brother was not the youngest in the crowd.

After what Harry thought were ten minutes the silent crowd started to chant, "Avenge us, avenge us." Over and over their chant continued until it filled the room. But then a second line filed in, these dressed in

the black robes of Death Eaters. There were several screams of fear from those who recognized the Death Eater that had sent them here.

They entered just as silently as the first ones, but they pushed their way through that ring and started to circle Harry, as if he were their prey. They were walking in the opposite direction as the others and never took their eyes off Harry. Those they touched screamed from pain, as if that very touch had driven a stake through their heart. Harry knew that not all of these Death Eaters were dead. He saw the stooped figure of Wormtail and the tall, proud frame of Lucius Malfoy. But here they were circling him nonetheless.

Unlike the others, who were still chanting, the Death Eaters stayed quiet. It seemed that they were waiting for someone or something. And then Harry saw what it was. As soon as that thin tall figure stepped in to the room everyone stopped and became quiet. The outside ghosts seemed to shy away from him. He didn't even look at them, even though he had killed or tortured them or given orders for others to carry it out. He looked at Harry and laughed his cruel high pitiless laugh.

"You see them?" he said waving at the host of the dead. Many screamed from fear at the attention he had given them. Voldemort listened with a sadistic smile on his face. He continued when they were quiet again. "They all fell to me. You see them?" he asked waving at the Death Eaters closing in on Harry. "They obey every command I give. How can you possibly think of defeating me?" He laughed again and Harry felt his blood run cold. The Death Eaters joined in and the host of dead shied away into the farthest corners of the hall. "Go back to your playing. Forget these dreams of revenge. You will only end up being one of them."

Harry stared at the hundreds of souls sent to the beyond by Voldemort. And, unlike normal, Harry felt despair. He was right. How could Harry ever beat Voldemort? How could he even dare plan revenge? Harry sank to his knees; the Death Eaters tightened their circle.

Then quietly, a voice spoke from the host. Harry wasn't even sure if he had actually heard it, but its words echoed in his brain. "Harry, we

love you.” Somehow Harry knew that it was his mother’s voice and it gave him some strength. He stood up again, but despair still filled him. Voldemort had over come the protection her loving sacrifice had given him.

Then there was a long high-pitched wail from one of the dead victims and Harry fell back to the ground, defeated.

“Harry, wake up, mate. Class is over.” Ron was startled by the look in Harry’s eyes. They were dead. Completely dead. The only emotions were fear, despair, and a deep sadness.

“I’ll never be able to do it,” Harry said aloud. Somehow Ron knew that Harry wasn’t talking to him.

“What’s the matter, mate?” Ron asked confused and concerned. Sure Harry had those looks before, but nothing like this. It was a look filled with horror, with terror, and with loss. But Harry shook his head and looked back at Ron. Ron was glad to see that the look was gone, but he had a feeling that it was just hidden behind the wall Harry had built over the summer.

“Nothing. Go to class, Professor Black wanted to talk to me.” Ron left and Harry walked over to Thia. She was standing in front of the Wall, staring at it sadly.

“I took that picture the Christmas your parents announced that Lily was pregnant with you. They were so happy. That village is Godric’s Hollow, where they lived and where you were born. That’s a picture of Sirius after graduation. None of us, he least of all, could believe that he had made it to the end and gotten a diploma.” She was smiling sadly.

“What did you want to talk about?” Harry asked. He didn’t want this to take to long or he’d be late for Charms, again.

“I just wanted to know if you wanted extra training. You seem to get into a lot of dangerous trouble and...” she stopped startled. Harry’s eyes had clouded over with pain and suffering. There was also

despair and horror there. The look Ron had seen just minutes before was back.

Harry didn't want to get into trouble; it usually found him. How could it not with a mad murder after him? With a prophecy that said kill or be killed? How could he ever hope to defeat him? How could a 16-year-old boy hope to destroy the darkest, evilest, most powerful Dark Lord in centuries? All he wanted to do was run away and hide from.... Him....

"No, I don't!" And he stalked out the classroom as fast as he could.

Harry decided to skip Charms class. He couldn't think clearly anyway and he didn't want to be surrounded by people right now. Was that a message from Voldemort or from his subconscious? He ran until he reached the stairs to the highest Astronomy tower and stopped. He always thought better in the air and this was close enough for the moment. He quickly climbed the stairs.

Why was it this dream that bothered Harry the most? He had been reliving the deaths of Sirius, Sephra's parents, Cedric and the horrifying events of the graveyard for months. Why was this threat from Voldemort different?

Maybe because it's true? Harry thought to himself. He'd never be able to win, not ever. Harry went over to the edge of the tower and looked at the ground far below. He loved the views from the high towers. They always took his breath away.

He didn't know why he had run from Thia. She was nice and would have been willing to talk, later after her last class. The only problem was that Harry didn't know her that well. He was too shy to talk to her about this. And there was the problem of the prophecy.

That's why he wouldn't tell Ron or Hermione about this dream. It would only lead to uncomfortable questions. Questions that Hermione was dying to ask. He jumped onto the low wall that surrounded the top of the tower and looked out over Hogwarts, the wind pulling at his robes. He loved the freedom being up here gave him. Nothing to think about. Nothing to do. No damn Prophecy to control his fate.

Should he tell them about it? They deserved to know. They had gone to the Ministry with him. They had stood by his side for years. But telling them would put them in danger. If Voldemort found out that they knew... Harry shivered from the fear of what he could do to them to get that knowledge. He watched owls leave the Owlery to start hunting early. Harry wished he could be a bird; to always have the freedom of flight. What a gift that would be.

And how would they react. Would it be the final straw that pushed them away forever? Would they believe that he was too dangerous to know? Harry laughed at that. Who was he kidding; he was too dangerous to know.

OR — did he dare hope for this possibility?

Would they stay by his side till the end? Would they stay and fight with him until the final battle with Voldemort? But Harry didn't want that either. It would just get them killed and Harry didn't think he could stand to lose them as he had lost so many loved ones.

The bell rang for classes to be dismissed for supper and Harry was tempted to stay up there, where it was so peaceful and so calm. Where it was blissfully quiet. Where there were no screams.

Chapter Eleven: To Have Your Luck

Rolling stone
Gathers no moss,
But leaves a trail
Of busted stuff.
Dave Matthews Band: Busted stuff

The week went by in a blur for Harry. Snape had actually given Harry an E on his essay. Professor Flitwick had forgiven Harry for skipping his class. Thia had given Harry a look when he entered the classroom that he could not translate. It was, he thought, a mix between pity, concern, and disapproval.

It was now Friday and Defense Against the Dark Arts was the last class of the day. Thia had started out the class by telling them that something had popped up that she had to take care of Tuesday and Wednesday night. Because of that, she had not had time to correct their tests; she had barely been able to correct the seventh years' tests and hadn't even gotten to the fifth years'.

So they spent the class decorating the classroom. It was more fun than Harry had thought it would be. She taught them a charm that would change the color of the wall. They decided, after a heated discussion, that they would "paint" large squares and rectangles of different colors on the walls. The Gryffindors made sure there was a large red square, the Hufflepuffs a yellow one, the Ravenclaws a blue one, and the Slytherins a green one.

The wall behind the pictures was changed to pitch black in respect for the dead. Harry had let his name for it slip one night when they were talking about it in the dorm. The other boys had liked it and it had spread among the sixth years. Dean, who was a talented artist, had created a sign to hang over it and they put it up. At the moment, he was drawing a large lion to place on the red square above.

Everyone agreed that the bookshelves had to be changed, but they couldn't decide how. In the end, they decided to "paint" them a deep purple color, almost black, and the back panel a golden yellow, to lighten them up. Someone accidentally knocked off a shelf, but they

left it crooked and “crooked-fied” many others. They transformed some rocks that Professor Black had allowed them to collect from the lakeshore into misshapen book holders to keep those books in place.

Someone added a pin to the map of Great Britain to show where they lived and everyone else followed suit. Harry placed his pin right next to Ron’s. They finally stopped working and took a look at their new room.

It was definitely odd. On the walls, people had started to use odd shapes, not just squares and rectangles. There were several shades of reds, blues, yellows, greens, pinks, purples, oranges, browns, and even one square of white. The maps still hung straight, but now one was covered in multi-colored pins. The bookshelves were a usable mess and the colors were complementary. And the Wall of Loss stood out as the only black spot in the room, its sign appearing to cry from the pain.

Someone looked down at the floor and laughed. In stripes running between the bookshelves and the windows were zebra and leopard prints. In the middle of the room, where they would be dueling was a rectangle painted differently. It had four stripes, one red, one yellow, one blue, and one green.

Thia smiled at them and waved at the floor. “You like? I thought it added something. I think that I will come up with some competition for the middle. Maybe, it’ll be something along the lines of the house cup but on a smaller scale. If Dean would draw me a badger, eagle, and snake I will add them to the stripes. Well, I’ll come up with something.” The bell rang and the students grabbed their bags and headed for the door. “Have a good weekend.”

At six Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny headed to the Room of Requirement to get ready for the D.A. meeting that night. There wasn’t much to set up, but the people asking him what he planned to do that evening had started to annoy Harry. Unfortunately, Ron was also one of those people, and now that everyone else was gone he wouldn’t stop asking.

In the end, Hermione yelled at him to shut up and Ginny hit him hard on the shoulder. Ron sat in a big comfy chair in the corner and rubbed his shoulder sullenly. Harry laughed at him and thought about what he planned to do. He had sneaked a peak in the fifth and seventh years' classrooms and saw that they also had Walls of Loss. He had taken a look at some of the pictures and felt a leaden weight fall to the bottom of his stomach. How was he ever going to survive a duel with Voldemort?

But those Walls had given Harry an idea. He now knew what he was going to say and teach this year. He had informed any new people that tonight's meeting was for last year's members only. He had let the returning people know that too, so that they wouldn't bring a guest. He knew he would have to find a way to initiate new members, so that they didn't have a repeat of last year. Not that it mattered as much, but Harry didn't want to train the next generation of Death Eaters.

Everyone was there by 7:08 and they sat in chairs, beanbags, and on pillows forming a semi-circle around Harry. Professor McGonagall was sitting in a chair off to the side, next to the fireplace. Harry looked at each eager face and sighed. He'd hate to say what he was going to, but someone had to say it. He ran his fingers through his hair, once again contemplating changing his mind about tonight's lesson. Well, he thought to himself, it's too late for that. He glanced at the clock once again and saw that it was 7:11. He'd wasted eleven minutes and he would need them.

"Hello, everyone. Welcome back to the D.A. Because we're legit this year, we need a teacher supervisor. It will either be Professors McGonagall or Black. I hope none of you mind." There were murmurs of no and people shook their heads. "Good, 'cause it's a little late to change that." He looked around at the people and sighed.

"Other than those here, no one under the fifth year will be allowed to join, because of the rules. I am also going to invite Slytherins to join. They lost as many to the Dark Lord as our houses did. Maybe extending the hand of friendship will deter just one of them from taking the Dark Mark." Harry sure hoped it would, it would be one less

enemy and one more ally. "I think that the Sorting Hat's right. Just because you're sorted into that house doesn't make you bad.

"You all know Sephra, or at least know of her, the new girl?" There were nods and some yes's so Harry continued. "Well, even though I'm positive that she's against Voldemort," even among this group the majority shivered or gasped at the name, "she's a Slytherin. And something Professor Black said during our first class hit home. Being Slytherin doesn't mean being evil. The Sorting Hat has never described them as such. He always calls them cunning or shrewd or I don't know. But you get my point?"

"I'm not befriending a Slytherin!" Zachariah Smith said hotly. There were several people who agreed with him. Harry thought he saw McGonagall let out a small sigh of disappointment in them. He glared at Zachariah and then ran his hand through his hair once more.

"What if I was a Slytherin? The amazing, famous Boy Who Lived?" Harry asked bitterly.

His question was met by silence. He shook his head bitterly. He turned to Ron, who had agreed with Zachariah, and asked him, "Where would our friendship be if I had ended up in Slytherin?" Ron looked away guiltily. "Even after turning away Draco's friendship for yours, you would desert me, just as you were ready to desert Sephra." He glanced around the room and went on with what would be one of the harder things he would tell them that night.

"Well, I almost ended up in that house. It was because of biased people's opinion of that House that made me tell the Hat that I wanted to be in Gryffindor and not in Slytherin." Once again there was silence, but this time it was a stunned silence. "I've only ever told Professor Dumbledore that. Even when I asked the Hat again a few years ago, it stood by its statement. 'You would do well in that House.' That's what it told me." Harry took a deep breath before he continued.

"I've thought about that a lot recently," Harry informed them quietly. "And I have to agree. I have a lot in common with the typical Slytherin. I dislike, if not hate, many people. I'm not against breaking the rules. I

lie to get out of trouble. I have a certain cunning that allows me to get out of danger with my head still attached to my neck. I'm not against retreating to live to fight another day. I'm very introverted when I want to be, and my temper can't be beat when it reaches boiling point." Harry stopped and ran his fingers through his hair once again. There was complete silence. He took a peek at McGonagall and her face was shining with pride.

"But I ask myself, 'How did I pull Gryffindor's sword out of the Hat my second year?' Because my choices make me what I am, and I'm not what people typically think a Slytherin is. I don't curse or kill those I hate every chance I get. I own up to my rule-breaking if pressed to or faced with proof. I don't leave without my friends when they're in trouble. I always come back to fight. And, with one or two exceptions, I always apologize for losing my temper." He stopped thinking about what he was about to say next.

"But does that make me a Gryffindor? I don't think so either. What is a Gryffindor then? What is a Ravenclaw? What is a Hufflepuff?" Harry stopped to let them think about it. "I think what makes us a member a certain House is harder to describe than simple adjectives like brave or smart or loyal. It's something deeper than that. Hermione's the biggest bookworm in this room, yet she's a Gryffindor. Ron is a loyal friend, yet he's not a Hufflepuff. And I'm a poster child for the Slytherin house. Yet here I stand as a Gryffindor. I'm going to invite Slytherins to join the D.A. If any of you have a problem with that, there's the door." He pointed at the door and had the room open it for him. No one left.

"Do you stay because you agree with me, or because you want to learn?" Harry asked them sadly. "Does that make you any better than the bias purebloods out there killing in the name of Voldemort? Don't have double standards for yourselves. Don't stoop to their level."

Harry looked at each person and noticed that several wouldn't meet his eyes. He shook his head in disappointment and he ran his fingers through his hair again. "I'm not asking you to be friends with Death Eaters. I have my own problems with them and I want them to see justice just as much as you do. But not every Slytherin is a future Death Eater, and not every Death Eater was a Slytherin. Please,

remember that. Please, don't forget that." Harry turned to look into the fire. He wasn't sure how to say the next part. He hadn't come up with a way to say it right.

"I've lost people throughout my life," he started without turning to face them. "I've been dealt a bad hand more than once in my life. I know that. I also know that's why many of you wanted to learn from me. Because I've fought Death Eaters and Voldemort and basilisks and dementors. And somehow I'm still here. Well, that was a load of luck. I shouldn't be here," he told them frankly. "But help always came at the right time. I can't teach you that. There's no way for me to teach that. You either have it or you don't." Harry started to turn but decided not to. Ron and Hermione were slightly worried for Harry. Normally, he wasn't this forthcoming. He didn't talk like this. They hoped that he was all right with it.

He turned to face them, but he kept his eyes on the floor. Tears were threatening to fall. "How many of you still have parents or families that love you?" Most of the hands went up and Harry turned away. "The odds are that you won't survive a meeting with Voldemort. Actually, I'm the only person I know to beat those odds more than three times. But I'd trade my luck for the luck of those who raised their hands." Ginny noticed a slight shake in his shoulders. She thought it was a small sob. He continued after a moment. "But that's why we have to fight. That's why we can't lie down for them. So that our younger siblings and our future children don't have to grow up fearing the name Voldemort like we have had to. So that they don't have to fear death at his hands or by his orders."

He stopped. His throat had closed up once again from the tears that were threatening to spill. It took a while for him to get himself back under control, but once he had he turned to face them. They were lucky; none of them had a Prophecy hanging over their heads. "We have to fight. We have to learn to protect that which we love. We have to, because that's exactly what Voldemort doesn't want us to do. He wants us to hide and cringe in fear. Well, he'll be disappointed. If someday the fates are cruel to you and you meet him face to face, remember that. He wants you to cringe and tremble. Don't. It might be the last thing you do, but at least you went down fighting, not giving him pleasure."

The clock struck eight and Harry cursed himself. He knew he'd run out of time. He turned to look at McGonagall wanting permission to continue. Though curfew wasn't until nine, clubs couldn't go past eight. She nodded her head in approval, and Harry continued.

"I won't be much longer. I can't teach you luck and I can't teach you how to survive Voldemort, for as I said earlier, I shouldn't be here. I can't make you accept Slytherins and I can't make you see the spies in your own house. But I can teach you to defend those you love. And I can teach you how to fight for those you love. I've decided to focus more on offensive spells this year. If we're going to be an Army, then we better know how to fight. If any of you think that I'm wasting your time or if any of you are going to have major problems with the Slytherins, don't come back. Just hand me your galleon when you make that choice. I don't want those to fall into the wrong hands."

"I'm not teaching more than 35 people, and Slytherins are going to have first dibs on the empty spots. All people must be cleared through me. Do not bring someone without my approval. Is that understood?" Everyone nodded. Harry ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm going to ask Dumbledore, er," Harry said with an apologetic look at McGonagall, "Professor Dumbledore to make an announcement on Sunday about the club. Hopefully, he will say that if anyone is interested they should see me. With the exception of Slytherins, it's a first come first served basis. If some one comes up to me and is number 36, I'm sorry, they won't be allowed in. Thirty-five is already a lot for one person to teach, but I do want to let in new members and several Slytherins, so we'll make do." Harry looked at the clock and was surprised to see that it was already 8:23. "Well, that's it. I hope you all have a good weekend."

They all got up and left in twos or threes until they were all gone, except for Professor McGonagall, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Harry sat down tiredly in a huge fluffy chair that had just appeared behind him and put his head in his hands. "I didn't step over the line did I, Professor?"

She stared at the boy sadly. She had had a hard time remembering throughout that speech that Harry was a 16-year-old boy. He seemed

so much older and wiser. But he was only a boy forced to grow up too soon. "No, Harry, I don't think you did. I think you had to say exactly what you said." Harry looked at her thankfully, and she smiled at him.

"Oh, thanks." He stopped and looked into the fire. "I had more too, that I just remembered. Oh well, I'll save it for next time. Thank you for supervising, Professor. I really appreciated it. It's so nice not to be slinking around."

"Goodnight, Potter. Weasley." She nodded to him. "Miss Weasley. Miss Granger." She nodded to them both and then left the room.

"I'm sorry about putting you on the spot, Ron. It wasn't right of me, but I couldn't tell you before hand. I'm sorry," he apologized to his best friend, only glancing up from where his head was sitting in his hands. Ron couldn't be mad at such a sad figure and readily forgave him.

"No, mate. I'm the one who should be sorry. I would have turned my back on you." He shook his head, but Harry couldn't see it. "Thanks for showing me my problem, it's something that I need to work on."

"Harry?" Ginny asked quietly. When he didn't respond, she walked over and sat on a stool that had appeared in front of his chair. "Harry, look at me." He still wouldn't, so she grabbed his head and lifted it. He was crying. "Oh, Harry, why won't you tell us what's wrong?" she exclaimed. She stood up, sat on the arm of the chair and hugged him. Harry returned his head to his hands, but this time everyone could see the sobs. Hermione went and sat on the other arm and hugged him also. Ron stood behind her and put a hand on a bit of shoulder that was visible.

Harry was thankful for their comfort. He couldn't hold it in after McGonagall left. The tears that had been threatening all night had come, unbidden, and he couldn't stop them. Ron's apology hadn't helped either. After about ten minutes, the sobs stopped and Harry shook the girls off and had three chairs show up in front of him. They took the hint and sat in them. Harry turned towards the fire, trying to get his thoughts in order.

"Thanks, you guys are great friends." He stopped, for the tears were threatening again. "I miss them all. I want the pain to stop. I want to be able to think about them without feeling the tears come up. I want to be able to talk about them without sobbing." He stopped and looked at them desperately. "It sounds selfish, but I want to be able to think of them all the time. I don't want to limit it to times when I'm alone. I want to be able to tell everyone about them. How much I loved them and what they did for me, but that's impossible if I'm going to cry every time."

He stopped and felt the tears come back painfully. Ginny got up and hugged him again. Ron was surprised to see Harry lean into the embrace, and expected him to wrap his arms around her. Harry might have, had the two of them been alone, but he was just happy to be held right now. And he didn't want Ron mad at him.

"I don't want to dream anymore," he started quietly again, his head still on Ginny's shoulder.

"But, Harry," Hermione started concerned, "without dreams how can you plan a future." Harry sobbed silently into Ginny's shoulder and he almost told them about the Prophecy, but he couldn't.

"Not those kind of dreams, Hermione. It's been awhile since I've had one of those." He pried Ginny's arms off of him and looked her in the eyes. He was once again surprised at the amount of love and comfort he found in that gaze. "Thanks, Gin," he told her so quietly that Ron and Hermione didn't hear.

"I've had nightmares just about every night since the graveyard at the end of fourth year." He shivered from those memories. "They're about Cedric or the rebirth or that stupid door all of last year. And this summer I added Sirius falling through the veil and then Sephra's parents." He put his head back into his hands.

"Sephra's parents?" Ron asked confused.

"I was looking at the pictures on Monday and I recognized them. They were the couple who I watched die in July. Don't tell her how they died; she doesn't need to know that. I have a feeling that the Aurors

didn't let her see the bodies afterwards." He stopped and shook the image out of his mind. "I haven't slept well all summer, except for my birthday. I keep waking up from them and then falling back to sleep for a different one."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione looked at him sadly. "Why must you keep this to yourself? Why didn't you tell any of us? Ron, how could you not notice?"

Ron glanced at Harry and then looked at Hermione apologetically. "I did know. I also know that Harry hates it when you make a big deal about stuff like that, so I didn't tell you. Sorry, 'Mione." Harry looked up and smiled at Ron. He was glad that Ron was his best friend. He knew how to handle Harry's moods well. "Anyway, you couldn't have changed anything."

"Talking about stuff like that helps. My grandfather was in the military during WWI. He kept what happened to him bottled up for years. It wasn't until my aunt, who is psychiatrist, got him to talk about it that he started to feel better. It helped the dreams go away." Hermione shook her head at Harry. "Sometimes, Harry, you are so stupid. You know that?" Harry nodded. It was brutal, but she was right. The clock struck nine.

"Great, now we have to watch out for Filch," Ron complained loudly, but everyone decided to ignore him as they headed out to the Tower.

Once they were in bed, Harry thought that he would have a good night's sleep, because all of the talking and crying had tired him out. But he was wrong, as he usually was.

"Mwahahahahaha." Loud sadistic laughs rang out all over the tiny village of Ottery St. Catchpole. Harry glanced at the houses burning all around him. There were mutilated bodies lying everywhere. One of the laughs was coming from his left, and he turned to see Bellatrix torturing a little girl. Harry moved to stop her, but his body wouldn't respond.

Instead he opened his mouth and laughed a cold pitiless laugh. Harry felt his scar explode with pain. Great, just what I need, he thought, another vision from Voldemort.

“Bella, I hate to rip you from your games, for I do enjoy watching your fun, but we have other things to do. Go get the others and meet me at the bridge.” Bella gave him one pout before bowing. She left the child to die slowly. Voldemort decided to finish the job and used the Cruciatus on her. The girl cried out in fear and pain, but this just made Voldemort happier and Harry’s scar explode in more pain. He released her and killed her with a quick “Avada Kedavra!”

Voldemort walked slowly through the village, listening with pleasure as his Death Eaters ravaged those who lived here. This was the first Revelry since his return and it was going as planned. His Death Eaters were destroying the worthless muggles and soon they would deal with the blood traitors that lived to the south.

Harry was mortified by what he saw. There were limbs lying all around. The bodies they belonged to were strewn about like garbage. He heard several Death Eaters taunting a teenage girl down one alley. He watched as more Death Eaters tortured what could have been her parents; but Harry couldn’t even tell if they were human with all of the spells that had changed their shape. People were screaming all around him. People were dying and they would die in fear. These muggles would only ever meet the magical world once and this is what they saw. No wonder muggles feared witches and sorcerers. If this was all Harry saw of his world, he would too. In fact, this blatant disregard for human life scared Harry. How could they win against enemies that were so willing to kill and torture?

“Ah, Severus. I see you’ve had a bit of fun.” Voldemort swept his hands at the poisoned forms of four dead muggles and one going through his death throws. Snape nodded and bowed to his master. “Come, we are heading to the blood traitors now. I’m sure you would like to join us.” Snape bowed even lower and followed Voldemort through the village. At the bridge, Voldemort turned back to survey the village. It was completely and positively destroyed. It was amazing, the amount of destruction these humans could cause without once feeling grief. However, the sight brought a smile to

Voldemort's face and because of that smile, Harry's scar felt as if it ripped in two.

Ten minutes later, Harry felt his blood run cold as a familiar sight unfolded in front of him. He had dreaded that this was where Voldemort and his Death Eaters were heading. Harry felt his heart break as the only house he had ever called home appeared: the Burrow.

"Cast an anti-apparation ward," Voldemort commanded Snape. He cast the spell, and a pale orange bubble appeared over the house, but that sign soon disappeared. "Let us knock to let them know that they have guests." He flicked his wand at a large stone and sent it flying at the house. It missed the door and went through the window instead. "Oh, I missed. I must try again." He sent another through the other window and the Death Eaters laughed at his joke. Harry was angry to see that Snape joined in as well.

The door opened and Harry's heart fell as Mrs. and Mr. Weasley came outside. Harry could see that they had their wands out and that their hands were shaking, but they came out nonetheless. Harry hoped that Bill and the twins had gotten out safely.

"Hello, Tom," Mrs. Weasley said in a confident voice. Harry was filled with pride at her next words. "Would you like a cup of tea? I'm sure you've been busy killing innocent muggles and must be thirsty. Could you please introduce us to your little friends? I don't think we've had the pleasure of meeting before."

"Shut up! Do not talk to me, woman," he spat at her. "I am here to collect the bill this family has been running high. You associate yourselves with muggles, mudbloods, and half-bloods, which is just as revolting. Your total is a very painful death. Crucio!" Harry watched as Mr. Weasley fell under the curse. After several minutes, he lifted the curse. "Bella, the woman is yours. Do with her what you wish."

She stepped forward and pointed her wand at Mrs. Weasley. "Crucio!" Harry watched as Mr. Weasley stepped in front of the spell. Bella lifted it quickly. She didn't want to enrage her master by wounding him.

Voldemort laughed, and then turned toward one of his servants. "See, Wormtail, that is the bravery you lack. Arthur Weasley, you are a true Gryffindor and scum of the magical world. Do you have any last words?"

"Just a few. One, how anyone could turn against their own blood like you have is beyond me. Two, you may kill us, if you can. Three, beware of Harry Potter. He is sick of your games and will destroy you one day, when he is ready. He is preparing for you and when you meet him, well, I'll be glad I'm on his side and that I'm not you. I'd stop your games, your Revelries, if I were you."

"Well, Arthur, I am not you, and I am not frightened by a little boy. Goodbye." He pointed his wand at Arthur and said, "Avada Ked—"

"Harry, Harry," Ron was shaking him roughly. "Wake up, mate, it's just a dream."

Harry rolled over and vomited onto the floor, losing everything that he had eaten for dinner. Then he threw up again, losing everything that he had eaten for lunch. Then he puked, losing everything that he had eaten for breakfast that morning.

"I need," Harry croaked, but his voice was sore and dry. He must have been screaming. Someone handed him a glass of water and his glasses. It was Seamus. He drank the water and turned to see the worried looks on the faces of his dorm mates. "I need to see Dumbledore. Now."

"Scourgify!" Ron said, pointing at the mess on the floor. "No, I think you need to see Madam Pomfrey."

"Mr. Potter, are you alright?" Professor McGonagall asked, coming into their dorm room. Harry had a flashback to Christmas last year and felt his stomach lurch again. He hoped that Mr. Weasley had gotten away, but deep down he knew that it would have been impossible.

"Yes, but I need to see the headmaster. I had a dream about a revelry," he added slightly emphasizing the last word. McGonagall caught onto it and motioned for him to follow her. Ron followed them out, but Harry wished he hadn't. It was going to be hard enough to talk about it without having Ron there, but it was Ron's home and Ron's family in danger. Harry knew that Ron would feel a lot worse. And if they were dead, then he would need to tell Ginny. Harry felt himself hoping that they had miraculously survived.

McGonagall stopped in front of the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office and said shortly, "Skiving Snackbox." The gargoyle leapt aside and they climbed onto the moving staircase. At the door, McGonagall knocked using the griffin doorknocker.

There was a short pause and then Dumbledore said, "Come in." They entered and Dumbledore rose to greet them. "You weren't who I was expecting." It seemed that Dumbledore was talking to himself, so Harry ignored it.

"Potter had another vision, Albus. He wanted to talk to you about it, and I find that I agree with him." Dumbledore looked at Harry worriedly and motioned them to sit in the chairs that he had conjured for them. Harry noticed that there was a fourth chair. He guessed that it was for whomever Dumbledore was expecting.

"Please, Harry tell me about it." Dumbledore looked at him through his half-moon glasses and absently stroked his long beard.

"It started out in a village," he stumbled over that word glancing at Ron. "The Death Eaters were torturing the muggles that lived there. Voldemort told Bellatrix to get some Death Eaters and to meet him at the bridge. On his way he met Snape..."

"Professor Snape, Harry."

"He met Snape and they met the others at the bridge. They walked to the... the..." Harry couldn't say it. He looked at Ron and shook his head. He just couldn't say it.

"The Burrow?" Dumbledore asked quietly. Ron went ashen-grey when Harry nodded and he almost threw up.

"They threw some stones through the windows and Mrs. and Mr. Weasley came out. They exchanged some words and Voldemort used the Cruciatus on Mr. Weasley." Harry was now looking at his shoes. This was worse than last year. "Then Voldemort told Bellatrix to do as she wished with Mrs. Weasley. Bellatrix cast the Cruciatus, but Mr. Weasley took the spell. That amused Voldemort, but he was done playing. He was casting the killing curse when Ron woke me. I don't know if they survived."

"Why didn't they disappear?" Ron asked confused.

"Because Snape cast an anti-apparation ward. They couldn't," Harry answered bitterly. If the Weasleys were dead because of this, Snape would pay dearly.

"Please, Harry, he is still your Professor. Show him some respect," Dumbledore said tiredly.

"I can't show respect to someone who uses his gifts to murder, sir. I just can't."

Dumbledore sighed sadly. "Because of Severus, we knew about this attack. Conveniently, the Weasley boys living at home were at friends' houses tonight. Ron, we will have to wait and see if our plan for your parents worked."

"Why didn't the Order just attack them, if they knew about it?" Ron asked.

"Because, if too many of Voldemort's plans go awry, he will start doubting loyalties," Dumbledore answered. "Severus will be one of the first to lose Voldemort's trust, for several reasons. Your parents volunteered to do this. In fact, most of tonight's plans were theirs." Harry couldn't help but feel impressed. No wonder they were so calm. They had known that it was going to happen.

They sat in silence for several minutes, waiting for Dumbledore's other guest. Harry looked around the room. He spotted Fawkes, and the bird sang a bit of its song. Just that small bit gave Harry strength. He saw the sword he pulled from the Sorting Hat next to the Sorting Hat itself. He couldn't believe that only a few short hours ago he had been talking to the D.A. about this year's goals. Harry wanted to ask Dumbledore about giving an announcement at lunch, but held himself in check. Now was not the time for that.

On the walls were pictures of the old headmasters and mistresses. They all feigned sleep, but Harry caught two or three peek a look at them. He looked at the cupboard that held Dumbledore's Pensieve. Harry wondered what new thoughts Dumbledore had added recently. There was a quick knock at the door and everyone turned.

"Come on in," Dumbledore said loudly. In walked Snape, still dressed in his Death Eater robes. His sharp eyes took in Harry, Ron, and McGonagall, and only showed surprise for a quick moment.

Chapter Twelve: Why Are You Here?

Because one day it ends,
One day we die,
Believe what you will,
That is your right.
But I choose to win,
So I choose to fight.
Creed: Weathered

"I suppose the boy saw the Revelry?" Snape asked bitterly, throwing his cloak over the back of the empty chair. At times like this, Harry wondered what he had done to deserve that bitterness.

"Yes, I did. I also saw your part in it," Harry added contemptuously.

Snape dropped into the chair tiredly, rubbing at his temples. Ron and Harry exchanged one quick glance. Snape looked so human just now. They had never seen any emotions besides hatred and anger from this man before.

"Did all go as planned?" Dumbledore asked after a slight pause. Snape nodded.

"More or less. You wouldn't have anything to drink, would you, Headmaster?" Snape asked quietly. Harry noticed that his voice was hoarse. It hadn't been when he had cast the ward earlier that night.

"Yes, your normal?" Snape nodded and Dumbledore opened a cupboard that Harry had never seen into before and poured Snape a shot of fire-whisky. "What do you mean, more or less?"

"They got out alive. Safe and sound, relatively speaking," he said. He then downed the shot in one gulp. "May I have a cup of tea, sir?" His voice sounded hoarse from screaming. Dumbledore seemed to think of that at the same moment.

"You were punished?" Dumbledore asked sadly. Snape nodded. "I'm sorry, Severus." He conjured a cup of tea and Snape drank it slowly.

"None of us would have guessed that he would have asked me to put up the anti-apparation wards." Snape took another drink. "I'm not kept around for my spell work," he added bitterly. He finished the cup and looked into the dregs.

"How'd they get out?" Ron asked slowly.

"Portkeys," Dumbledore answered quietly.

"Why couldn't you tell us that before? It would have given us a little hope!" Harry yelled at the Headmaster. He turned to Snape. "Not kept around for your spell work. No, he wants your poisons and truth serums, doesn't he? You know exactly which antidotes we need to learn, because you're brewing the poisons!"

"If that's all you want me for, Headmaster, I would like to head to my rooms," Snape said without looking at Harry once.

"Not in the mood to fight, Snape? But you were in the mood to kill innocent muggles!" Harry was in a rage now. He wasn't in the mood to be rational. He had just watched the most horrify thing in his life. Sure the Revelry had been horrible, but watching as Voldemort and several Death Eaters walked up to the Burrow... That had been awful. And then the hideous wait to find out if the Weasleys were all right. Why hadn't Dumbledore told them about the Portkeys?

"Potter, don't speak of what you do not understand," Snape said tiredly. Harry was surprised, but no one could tell that. Snape had never let his emotions be so visible before. "I am tired from my fight with the Dark Lord over my mind. I do not have energy to argue with you over trivial things such as what I have to do to keep my cover."

"Had it not been for Severus' information," Professor McGonagall said quietly, trying to placate him, "Molly and Arthur would have died along with Bill, Fred, and George."

"Had it not been for Snape's poisons, several innocent muggles would be alive," Harry yelled back. "At least the Weasley's chose to fight. Those muggles didn't even know that magic really existed!"

“Severus, I do not need you for anything else tonight. You may leave if you wish.” Snape stood and bowed his head slightly towards Dumbledore. He grabbed his cloak and left.

“Harry, it would serve you better if you did not antagonize Professor Snape. The deaths that he has caused and those that he must cause weigh heavily on his conscience,” Dumbledore said looking at the angry boy. Deep in Harry’s eyes, Dumbledore saw surprise, but on the outside there was no sign of it. Dumbledore sighed. Yet another young man who has learnt to hide his emotions, he thought tiredly to himself. “Harry, please go easy on him. We need a spy. But in order to keep his cover he must kill. He changes the potions so that they cause less pain or kill swifter than they’re meant to. Not by much, or the other potion masters in Voldemort’s service would notice.”

Harry nodded but Dumbledore knew that he was unconvinced. “You boys may return to the Gryffindor Tower. But please, keep Professor Snape’s involvement quiet. He needs the protection of Hogwarts and I can not give it to him if it gets out that he has taken the Dark Mark and still serves Voldemort.”

When Harry and Ron got back to the common room they decided not go to bed again. Harry knew he couldn’t sleep and, by the looks of Ron, he wouldn’t be able to either. So they sat in their favorite armchairs by the fire, not speaking.

They sat there until it started growing brighter from the rising sun. Without speaking, they both went up to the dorm and got dressed for the day. Neville, Seamus, and Dean had gone back to sleep; Harry hoped that they hadn’t stayed up waiting for them to return.

Several hours later, a very sleepy Ginny came down the stairs. She walked over to them and Ron gave her hug.

“What’s the matter, Ron?” She looked concerned; Harry guessed that they didn’t look too good.

“The Burrow was attacked last night,” Harry answered, but continued quickly when he saw the look on her face. “Your brothers weren’t home and your parents got away. We haven’t been able to sleep. I

can't get it out of my head." Harry shook his head, trying to get the visuals out.

"The Death Eaters devastated Ottery St. Catchpole," Ron continued because Ginny gave him a quizzical look. "He watched some of that, too," he whispered in her ear.

"But they're all alive?" she asked. Both boys nodded. "I've got to owl Mum." She ran up the stairs and disappeared into the girls' dorm.

"I should do that, too," Ron muttered. Harry nodded and followed him up the stairs. They both wrote a note and went up to the Owlery. Ginny was already there with Hermione. They decided to all use Hedwig and sent her off, hoping she would be able to find them.

"I wonder if they destroyed the house?" Ginny asked quietly. Ron nodded and Harry couldn't help but feel that they had. They stood watching as the sun cast its bright light across the grounds, and the forest woke up with it.

"C'mon, we need to eat," Harry said after awhile. "Quidditch tryouts are today and you guys don't get on the team just because you're my best friends."

They headed to the Great Hall and sat at the Gryffindor table. Harry ate as much as he could force himself to and pleaded and prodded until Ginny and Ron had eaten as well. Harry saw Professor Dumbledore and guilt stormed his mind. He needed to apologize and ask him to make the announcement.

"I'll be right back," Harry mumbled to his friends and he headed up to the teacher's table. He noticed that most of the teachers were already up. The only one Harry couldn't find was Snape. He reached the table and walked along it until he was in front of Dumbledore.

"Headmaster?" Harry asked, getting Dumbledore's attention from the conversation that he was having with Professor McGonagall. Dumbledore turned to face him and nodded. "I just wanted to apologize for losing my temper last night. And," he turned toward McGonagall, "for yelling at you. I should learn to control it." He looked

down at his shoes and missed the smiles that the two Professors shared.

“Well, Harry,” Dumbledore said knowingly, “the first way to get rid of a problem is to recognize it. I’m sure you’ll beat this particular problem someday.” Harry looked up at the old man.

“Sir,” Harry continued. “I’m sorry for the end of term and the way I acted over the break. I shouldn’t have lashed out at you.”

“On the contrary, Harry,” Dumbledore said sadly. McGonagall looked confused. She had heard of the way Harry had treated Dumbledore at the Weasleys’ but, like everyone else, she didn’t know why. “I deserved that completely. I should be asking for your forgiveness.” His eyes looked miserable and Harry was angry with himself for not forgiving Dumbledore right away.

“Of course, Professor.” Harry saw the twinkle return and ignored the looks that Professor McGonagall was shooting them. “I was wondering if you would do me a favor.” Dumbledore nodded. “Well, it’s more for the D.A. than for me. I was wondering if you could tell everyone at lunch or supper tomorrow about it. I would really like it if you invited the Slytherins particularly. New members have to speak with me first and I’m only taking enough people to bring the total up to 35.”

“Is that all?” Dumbledore asked with a smile. Harry thought for a moment and nodded. “Harry, don’t lose faith in yourself. Don’t lose faith in your allies, either, because we will always be here for you.” Harry nodded, but then thought of something else to ask.

“Sir, did he destroy the house?” Harry saw a look of sadness pass over Dumbledore’s face, but it was quickly hidden.

“I’m afraid so, Harry. Have a good day and good luck with your tryouts.” Harry nodded and returned to his friends. He’d have to tell them eventually about the Burrow, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it now.

Tryouts went all right in Harry's opinion. They were looking for two new chasers and maybe replacement beaters. There were about fifteen people who came to try out. Katie and Harry had a hard time not laughing at several of them. It seemed that one or two of them had hardly ever flown before. Others though impressed them both. Sloper and Kirke, the beaters who replaced the Weasley twins last year, had practiced over the summer and definitely deserved their spots back.

As for the other two chasers, there was a third year girl, Natalie MacDonald, who impressed both of them and flew well with Katie. Harry knew that Ginny was also a great flyer, but the events of last night had unnerved her.

"I don't know, Harry, Timothy flew better today," Katie said questionably when he had suggested her.

"If you keep it quiet, I'll tell you why," Harry said. They were alone in the locker room discussing the spots. Everyone else had been dismissed and had gone back to the common room. Katie looked at him oddly, but nodded. "I'm serious, Katie, don't tell anyone. I don't think they want it to be public knowledge." She nodded again.

"Last night Voldemort attacked their home." She gasped and put her hand up to her mouth. "Everyone got out alive, but it still shook them up. Once she settles down she'll fly better. I watched her fly all summer when I was there, her and Ron. They've both gotten better."

Katie nodded and pulled out a piece of parchment, ink, and a quill. "So, Keeper- Ron Weasley," she said writing it down. "Seeker- Harry Potter, Beaters- Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper. Chasers- Katie Bell, Ginny Weasley, and Natalie MacDonald. Well, now we can figure out how to do this co-captain thing."

"Well, you definitely take charge during a game. Seekers are so out of the action that I'll have a hard time paying attention and seeking at the same time." She nodded. "You can work with the Chasers and Ron during practice and I'll work with beaters." She nodded.

“What about game plans? I’m pretty good with those,” Katie replied after a moment’s time of thought.

“Good, ‘cause I’m rubbish,” Harry told her honestly. “I don’t know that part of the game well enough. Ron could probably help, he’s good at strategies.” He thought for a moment. “How much time are you going to have with your N.E.W.T.’s this year?”

“I’ll make time,” Katie responded quickly. “Don’t worry about that. When are you planning to have D.A. meetings?”

“I was thinking every Friday,” Harry stopped for a second and thought about that. “But I don’t know. When there’s a game the next day, no one’s going to want to learn. I think I’m going to move them around like last year. That way we can work with the four Quidditch teams’ schedules.” They were walking back up to the Tower. There was a comfortable moment of silence between them. Harry could tell that he and Katie would work well this year. He looked at her as she started speaking.

“I really... oh, ‘liked’ is the wrong word,” Katie started. She stopped walking and thought for a moment. “Your speech was good last night. It made me think a lot. I actually had a hard time falling asleep because I couldn’t stop thinking.” Harry nodded and continued walking without her, trying not to think about anything. “Harry, there are times when I don’t know how you can get up in the morning and live. You’ve been through so much.” She stopped talking, obviously embarrassed.

“Don’t worry, there’s times when I can’t believe I’m still alive either,” Harry replied, but he couldn’t keep the bitterness completely out of his voice.

“That’s not what I meant.” She stopped walking and looked out at the quidditch pitch through a window. “I mean with everything you’ve lost, everything you’ve seen. The fifth, sixth, and seventh year girls are all close. We talk a lot at night. Lavender told us about the pictures you’ve put up. Ginny said you were looking for more pictures of people who’ve been hurt or killed. We’ve all heard about the graveyard from your interview with the Quibbler.” She started walking

again, but watched Harry from the corner of her eye. "How do you do it? How can you still continue? To still want to fight?" She shook her head and Harry thought about it for a second.

"I don't want to fight, I have to fight. If I don't, who will? How can I expect someone else to fight for those I love? I live every day, because if I don't, I let Voldemort win one more battle. I can't stop," Harry answered quietly. They were standing in front of the Fat Lady and she was staring at them grumpily. Katie was looking at him sadly, but she was slightly impressed.

"You don't mind me telling the other girls, 'cause they were all wondering the same thing?" Harry shook his head and gave the Fat Lady the password. Katie went to the bulletin board and posted the squad. Harry walked over and sat in the chair Ron had saved him.

"Don't worry, Gin," he said as she got up. "You made the team."

"I don't know why," Ginny said slumping back into her chair angrily. "I flew like crap today. There's no way that Katie let me on the team."

"Well, she did because the other captain watched you fly all summer, remember?" Harry said smiling. "He also knew the reason why you flew badly today." She looked at him thankfully and she also looked a little confused. "Don't worry, it wasn't that hard to convince her, she remembers you from last year. Natalie MacDonald is the other chaser," Harry said as the girl in question shrieked because she had just seen her name on the list. "Everyone else is the same from last year."

Harry went to bed that night knowing that he wouldn't sleep well. However, he still wasn't prepared for the dreams, or rather, the nightmares. All of the horrors of his life merged into one terrifying nightmare. He woke up several times that night, only to fall back asleep and have another nightmare just as bad as the one before. By the time dawn came, Harry was wide-awake and soaked in cold sweat. He got up and showered.

He spent the day with Ron, Hermione, and Ginny down by the lake. They had all brought homework to do and were talking absently about

the week. An owl came shortly after lunch from the Weasleys. They were alive and fine. They had settled into a new home (the four of them knew that it was Grimmauld Place) and were looking at rebuilding the Burrow.

Harry went to bed that night expecting the same thing as the night before. The dreams tonight were a hundred times worse. They sped past the relatively good parts and slowed down at the worst times. The time between portkeying to the graveyard and the time Harry heard "Kill the spare" took all of two seconds, even though in real life it had been about five minutes. And then the time from that to when Cedric hit the ground took what seemed like hours to happen. He watched as Cedric's body fell gracefully, landing with a soft thud that caused Harry to wake with a start, thankfully not screaming. He put on his glasses, glancing at the clock. His clock said that it was a little past two. Harry groaned and got up. He wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon.

He left the dorm and went to sit in front the fire in his favorite chair. He stared into the flames hoping to find answers there. Mr. Weasley's words from Friday night and Dumbledore's and Katie's words from Saturday kept coming back to him.

Mr. Weasley had looked so powerful listing off his "last words." Harry could clearly see him with three fingers up and defiance written all over his face.

"Three, beware of Harry Potter. He is sick of your games and will destroy you one day, when he is ready. He is preparing for you and when you meet him, well, I'll be glad I'm on his side and that I'm not you. I'd stop your games, your Revelries, if I were you."

Did Mr. Weasley know about the Prophecy? But if he didn't, how could he be so sure about what he, Harry, would do when he met Voldemort? Did he really believe that just any 16-year-old boy could do this?

"Harry, don't lose faith in yourself," Dumbledore had told him at breakfast yesterday morning. Had Thia told Dumbledore about Harry's reaction to the extra training? Harry wasn't even sure why

he'd reacted that way. He'd been thinking about asking for help that Tuesday morning. But he had turned it down that afternoon. Why?

Was he really terrified of Voldemort? Was he setting himself a double standard? He had told the D.A. members to go down fighting and then he ran away from the opportunity to learn how! He sullenly stared into the flames.

Looking into the flames and thinking about the D.A. reminded Harry of Sirius. He had talked to Sirius about starting the D.A. last year in this same fire. And Sirius had helped him with the first task during Harry's fourth year. Could Harry let Voldemort get away with killing his parents and destroying Sirius's life?

"Harry, there are times when I don't know how you can get up in the morning and live. You've been through so much." Katie had said that to him several hours after his talk with Dumbledore. How did he get up and live every day?

"I don't want to fight, I have to fight. If I don't, who will? How can I expect someone else to fight for those I love? I live every day, because if I don't, I let Voldemort win one more battle. I can't stop." There was that double standard again. He felt like he had to fight. No, he absolutely had to, not because he wanted to, but because of that stupid Prophecy. But if he didn't even train for the fight, how could he win? At least he'd have a fighting chance with training. Or at least he'd stand a better chance than without it.

Harry shook his head in frustration. Why did he have to be the one thinking about this? Why couldn't one of his sleeping classmates have the privilege of being the Boy Who Lived? Or why couldn't some adult worry about this?

Harry looked longingly up at the dorm rooms filled with sleeping students. He would never be able to be like them any more. They had no worries beyond their homework. And Harry was glad they didn't have to worry about this. It was his task. He wanted his classmates to have a childhood. He never really had one to start with, so it wasn't a huge loss to him. He was willing to fight for them.

He shook his head, surprised. He had found a reason to fight. Not for those who had died, though that was a bonus, but for those students upstairs sleeping without nightmares. Students who didn't know what war meant, what it was like to watch as someone was murdered. He didn't want them to have to know those things. He'd fight so that they needn't.

A hand shook Harry awake the next morning. "Harry, wake up. Harry, it's morning." Harry opened his eyes to see Ginny kneeling in front of his chair. "Harry, are you alright?"

Harry looked out the windows and saw the light streaming into the common room. He nodded and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He must have fallen asleep in his chair. It was the best rest he'd had for a long while.

"What are you doing down here?" Ginny was looking at him nervously. Harry wondered if she thought he'd had another vision.

"I couldn't sleep, so I came down here to think. I must have fallen asleep. Thanks for wake me, Gin. What time is it?" Ginny gave him a worried look, but she didn't question him.

"It's about seven. You should go get ready for classes. Don't forget you have potions today." Harry nodded and said goodbye. An hour and a half later he was making his way down to the Potions dungeon with Ron and Hermione.

It seemed that Professor Snape had decided to ignore Harry and every other Gryffindor in the class. But, instead of hurting them, it allowed them all to do better. Snape didn't even try to sabotage Harry's potion. But during the class, Harry came to a decision. He might not like the slimy git, but he was their spy. Harry might not trust him, but at the least Harry could show him some fake respect. Harry would try to, at least for Dumbledore's sake. The class ended and Harry told the other two to go on without him. Ron didn't want to, but Hermione grabbed his arm and lead him off.

Harry walked up to Snape's desk and waited patiently for the potion's master to acknowledge him. After about a minute, Snape looked up. "Yes, Mr. Potter," he said in a cold crisp tone.

"Professor," Harry started, but realized that this was the wrong time and thing to do. But it was too late now, so he continued. "Professor Snape, I was thinking about Friday night."

"Potter," Snape cut in, "I don't need to know when that little brain of yours actually starts to work. I have more important things to worry about."

Harry took a deep breath, promising himself that he wouldn't lose his temper. "I was wrong to yell at you and Professor Dumbledore. I just wanted to apologize."

Snape gave him an odd look. Harry could tell that Snape was trying to see how authentic the apology was. Harry had, for the most part, been genuine. He should have kept his temper that night.

"Very well, Mr. Potter. You had better hurry before you're late for your class."

The time between then and the last class of the day, Defense Against the Dark Arts, seemed to fly by. Harry had decided to ask Thia if she was still willing to train him. He was nervous about how she was going to take the question.

"Welcome to another week," she started out cheerfully. Everyone grumbled a reply. This only made her smile wider. "I used to wonder if teachers enjoyed rubbing that into students' faces. I now know the answer: Yes, they do. But, before I get side tracked, I have finished correcting your pre-course test. I will hand them out now." Harry watched as she passed them out, one by one. Finally, she handed the last one to Ron. Harry looked at her startled, because he hadn't received one.

"I'd like to congratulate the top scorer of this test. I gave the same test to the fifth, sixth, and seventh year classes. That's why there are so many spells you don't know." She looked at them and many sighed in

relief. "However, the top scorer was not a seventh year student. It was Mr. Potter, who, with permission from all Heads of House, has just won Gryffindor 50 points." The Gryffindors let out a loud cheer and Harry felt his cheeks burn in embarrassment. "I should tell you all why. He knew every spell that I was planning to teach all three years during this school year. Not only that, but he knew several spells that are considered Auror level Defense. Congratulations, Mr. Potter. I hope you don't lose the points too soon.

"Now to move on," she glanced at her desk and picked up several papers. "Oh, here's your test, Mr. Potter." She handed it to him and Harry noticed notes written on it by several different people. "I was pleased with all of your results. They weren't as dismal as I had thought they would be, with the teacher that you had last year. I think we'll be dueling by the end of October."

The class was a good one. Harry realized, though, that all he'd be learning until October would be theory; he already knew all the spells from practical experience. Subconsciously, Harry became Thia's aide. He helped his classmates near him, showing them the right wand technique and telling them the correct pronunciations. The double period ended and the school day was over. Harry told Ron and Hermione to go ahead and leave; he'd meet them in the common room later. They left, but Hermione was worried and Ron was confused, because this was the second time he spoke to a teacher alone today.

He went over to the Wall and stared at all the pictures but the ones he had put up. He had sneaked in on Sunday to put up the pictures Remus had sent him. He hadn't wanted to answer questions about them, because he couldn't really answer them. Thia was busy working; she didn't notice him until he spoke.

"Professor, I was wondering if your offer still stood?" Harry asked just loud enough for her to hear. She looked up, but Harry was still staring at the Wall.

"Thia, please, Harry. And yes it is; now more than ever. With your score on the test and with what you did today, it's clear to me that I can't teach you anything in class. But, if you want, I will give you extra

lessons.” She stood and walked over to him. “I was wondering why you turned me down. I don’t want to start teaching you and then have you quit on me.”

Harry stared at the picture of his parents. He felt like he should tell her everything, but something held him back. “How much do you know about me?” He wanted to know if she knew about the Prophecy.

“I know what you’ll need to do, if that’s what you want to know. Lily told me when she gave me your gift.” Harry nodded and continued staring at his mom and dad.

“That class, I took a nap after I finished the test.” She nodded. Harry looked so tired all the time; she had decided that it wasn’t hurting anyone if he slept. “I had a dream, or really, it was a nightmare. It freaked me out and, well, made me doubt myself.” Harry fell silent and took a seat in the nearest desk. “I hadn’t come to terms with the future yet and the thought of training for it made it seem so real.” Harry shook his head.

“So why are you here?” Harry looked at the desk for a long time, thinking about the answer. When he looked at her to speak she noticed two things about his eyes. His determination shown from his emerald eyes, just as it had from Lily’s the last time they had seen each other. Second, there was deep-rooted fear and terror, just as there had been in Lily’s.

“Because, if I don’t fight, no one else can. Because if I don’t, I condemn my classmates and everyone else to a world ruled by Voldemort.” Harry once again wished that this wasn’t his fate, but it was a short-lived wish “Because I will.” Determination rang from his voice and Thia saw a little bit of what Minerva had told the staff about at the Saturday staff meeting. Minerva had tried to convey to them the aura of power that Harry had generated during the D.A. meeting.

“Alright. How about meeting every Tuesday and Thursday after classes, but before supper?” Harry nodded. “And then maybe sometime every weekend. Three times a week isn’t enough time, but you have other concerns that you shouldn’t drop.” Harry was unnerved by the look she was giving him. It was as if she was trying

to figure him out. "I was wondering if you would help me every class. The only problem with having everyone together like this is that I can't give everyone the attention they need."

"Sure, it doesn't bother me. It'll give me something to do. Anything else, Professor?"

She smiled, "Yes, call me Thia when we aren't in class."

"Ok, good evening, Thia."

Harry told Ron, Hermione, and Ginny about his conversations with Snape and Thia. They were glad Harry would have extra lessons, not because they now knew about the Prophecy, because he hadn't told them yet. Instead, they were glad because his year wouldn't be wasted. They had moved on to talking about the Gryffindor Quidditch team, which was having their first practice that night.

"I think you'll be a good captain, Harry," Hermione said for the hundredth time after Harry had said he had no idea what he was doing, for the hundredth time also.

"You sure will, mate," Ron added encouragingly.

"Our first game is against Slytherin in November. Do you think we'll be ready by then?" Ginny asked Ron and Harry.

"I think so. You girls will fly really well together," Harry answered thoughtfully. "Natalie and Katie flew well together on Saturday at try-outs. And, Gin, you would have had Friday night not been what it was."

"Yeah, and Sloper and Kirke got really good over summer," Ron said after swallowing a huge amount of food. "They'll be able to beat bludgers at the other team, instead of their own," he added with a smile.

"I'm supposed to talk with you about Dumbledore's Army?" a well-built Slytherin asked. Harry looked at him and knew his name to be Blaise Zabini.

"Yes, you are." He put his fork down and stood up. "Harry Potter," he said holding his hand out for him to shake.

"Blaise Zabini. It's nice to meet a Gryffindor who will shake hands with a Slytherin." Harry nodded sadly.

"Yes, it's kind of pathetic. So you want to join the D.A.?" Harry thought about everything that he knew about the boy. Nothing had ever happened that made Harry doubt this boy's loyalties.

"Yes, along with my girlfriend Sephra and our friend Edlyn, a seventh year. We really appreciate the chance to do something to show where our loyalties stand. I'm sick of everyone thinking that I support Voldemort." Harry thought for a moment and nodded, coming to a decision about Blaise.

"I know Sephra, but who's Edlyn?" Blaise pointed out the Slytherin sitting next to Sephra, both girls were watching Harry and Blaise talk. "Have them come over, I'd like to meet her and talk to the three of you." Blaise motioned them to come over and they got up. Harry noticed Draco give Sephra a scathing look, but she just ignored him.

"Hello, I'm Harry Potter, you must be Edlyn." Harry shook her hand.

"Yes, Edlyn Slooth. It's nice to meet you. Sephra's told us a little about you." Edlyn seemed all right too.

"Not to sound mean, but how can I trust you three? And it's not 'cause you're Slytherins, I'm asking everyone that. Or I will when they talk to me. You're the first three."

"I'll vouch for them, Harry," Sephra said quietly. "They've both been a great help getting me settled in this year. And I'm pretty sure you know where my loyalties stand." Harry nodded. He searched through his school bag, looking for the small bag of ten new fake galleons. (Cho's friend hadn't shown up on Friday, though Cho had.) He found it and took three out.

"Welcome to the D.A." He said shaking their hands. "These are how we communicate. The serial number shows the time and date of meetings. If you look they say '791094' which stands for Wednesday at seven. Meet me here at 6:45 and I'll show you to the meeting spot." He looked over at the Slytherin table, noticing Draco watching them closely. "I don't think that I need to tell you not to let those fall into the wrong hands. And I don't think that your cousin is all that thrilled about you being over here, Sephra."

"I would doubt it," she said angrily and bitterly.

"See you Wednesday. Have a good evening." The three Slytherins went back to their table to eat.

"I can't believe you're going to do it, Harry. I think you just broke several un-breakable traditions." Ron said warningly.

"Well, it was about time someone broke them."

"I'd like to welcome our new members," Harry said that Wednesday night. He had just arrived with the ten new members in tow. There were five Slytherins (including Sephra, Blaise, and Edlyn), a seventh year Gryffindor, a fifth year Hufflepuff, and two sixth year Ravenclaws.

"As you can see, several Slytherins have joined. Please make them feel as welcome as the others." Harry looked over his small group. Professor Black was supervising tonight's meeting. His training with her the night before had been informative. She had gone over her plans for the training sessions. Harry was looking forward to it.

"We are also full up. There are 35 people here tonight and I've already had to turn people away." Harry looked at them and asked, "If you could let it get around that we aren't taking more members, I'd appreciate it."

"Tonight, I'm going to go over my rough plans for the year. I made the statement on Friday that we are an Army and so we'd better know how to fight. I'm sticking with that." Harry looked over the group; they all looked expectant and eager to learn. "But I cannot teach you what it's like to fight for your life. And even if I could, I wouldn't want to. I will

teach you offensive spells and how to protect against them. At some point, with approval from the staff, I would like to teach you how to defend against the Dark Arts.” There were several gasps and Harry saw the Slytherins give them a scornful look. “Not the Unforgivables, but other spells. I believe it’s a part of the sixth and seventh year curriculum already, so it’ll be an extension of that. Any questions so far?”

“Will we learn to duel?” one of the new Ravenclaws asked.

“Yes and soon. The first thing we’ll do is review from last year. I think that’ll take four lessons. The main reason is to make sure our new members know what the old ones do. If they have some problems, it’ll take longer. But don’t think,” Harry said turning to look each new member in the eyes, “I’ll let you pretend to know stuff, just so that we move on to dueling. I’ll know when you’re lying or not, just from your wand work. I also want you all to practice your Patroni this week.”

“What’s that?” the new fifth year Hufflepuff asked.

“Today’s lesson.” Harry taught them the spell and a little of the theory behind it. He then turned the old members over to Hermione to continue reviewing and completely focused his time on the new ones. By the time it was eight, there were 21 Patroni sprinting, flying, galloping, prancing, slithering, or crawling around the room. “Have a good evening and practice hard,” he said, dismissing them for the night.

Chapter Thirteen: Madame Puddifoot's Anyone?

You are pulled from this wreckage
Of your silent reverie,
You're in the arms of the angel,
May you find some comfort there.
Sarah McLachlan: Angel

When you are with me
I'm free... I'm careless... I believe...
Creed: My Sacrifice

The next day, Harry and Ron headed down to their last potion class of the week, slightly early. They were talking quietly about the other houses' chances of putting together good quidditch teams.

"I'm just worried about the Slytherin team," Harry whispered. "With Malfoy as captain, they could be vicious."

"Yeah, I'm with you on that," Ron answered back. "But, he wouldn't do anything too bad, would he? I mean, he wouldn't do anything to get himself expelled?"

"I don't know," Harry answered. He stopped suddenly. "What was that?" Ron shrugged and both boys listened. Someone was yelling at the end of a side passage. Harry exchanged a look with Ron and then headed down it.

Harry felt his jaw tighten as he realized that Draco was tormenting someone. A second corridor ran into the one they were in and Draco's voice was coming from around the corner. They couldn't make the words out yet, but there was no mistaking that pompous, sneering voice. They crept up to the corner and Harry took a quick peek around. Draco was yelling at a terrified Sephra. Ron tugged on his sleeve. Harry backed up and Ron took a peek.

"How dare you join that half-blood's club?" Draco yelled at her. "He's garbage and no sane Malfoy would even think about joining. And yet, you did! What do you think you are? You're just a girl. You have to learn to obey me."

Sephra said something that Harry couldn't understand. "Blaise won't be able to protect you either! Wait until his parents find about what he did. He'll be in as much trouble as you are now!"

"Dear cousin," Malfoy continued in a sickly sweet voice, "I can't punish you here, but wait until Christmas break. I don't want to punish you. But your actions deserve it. Do not do anything else to warrant more punishment. Just accept your new life. It'll be easier on you if you do." Draco's footsteps receded down that corridor. Harry pulled Ron's arm and they rounded the corner.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked her gently.

"Yeah," Sephra answered bitterly. "He's so full of himself! I just want to bring him down a peg or two."

"Join the club," Ron said, offering her a hand up. She took it and stood up. "You shouldn't let him push you around like that."

"He won't do anything bad, so I'll let him strut around," Sephra assured them. "And if he tries something here, I have a few surprises up my sleeve." The bell for the end of lunch rang. "Well, I have Ancient Runes this hour. See you guys later." She left down the passage the two boys had come by.

"What was that about?" Ron asked in wonderment.

"No idea, but if Draco hurts her," Harry promised to Ron, "I'll pound him into the ground."

September seemed to melt away for Harry. His days were packed with everything he had to do. There were classes to attend and homework to do. Harry was enjoying every class he had, even Potions. Of course, Snape still hadn't broken the silence towards the Gryffindors, so that might have been the only reason Harry liked it.

Training with Thia was a blast. She had decided to teach him some Dark Arts, not for him to use, but so that he would be prepared for the spells and know how to defend himself. She was also teaching him

how to duel, which was good, because Harry needed to know how to teach it for the D.A.

The D.A. was about halfway through the review Harry had planned for them. They grumbled about it, but Harry knew that the new members needed to go slower than the others. They met about once a week, but many complained about that too. Harry had to explain that he didn't have time to have the meetings on other nights. Unless they wanted to meet on the weekends also, they could only meet once a week. The other nights were filled with training with Thia and Quidditch practice.

Harry and Katie made a good coaching team. Between her and Ron, they had come up with a wonderful offensive plan. And the three chasers flew with one mind. Harry knew that they would be a better combination than Alicia, Angelina, and Katie had been. It was too bad that this was Katie's last year. Ron's keeping ability was superb. He hardly let the three girls score. And the beaters, well, they were hitting the targets Harry had floating around the pitch.

It was soon early Saturday morning of the last week of September. That day was the first Hogsmeade trip of the year. Hermione and Ron were going to go on a date, so Harry planned to bum along with Ginny. He hoped she, or her friends for that matter, didn't mind too much.

He was alone in the common room, staring into the fire. It was only three and the night was still pitch black. He'd gone to bed as normal, but the nightmares had been especially bad tonight. He had already woken Ron twice that night. So the last time he woke, he'd gone downstairs to think.

He was slightly mad at himself. He had planned to ask Ginny out, but his nerves had deserted him every time he had tried to bring it up. What Ginny thought about Harry couldn't be good. They'd had several weird conversations, because Harry had come up with bad excuses to talk with her.

An hour passed slowly and Harry was still thinking. What would he do if Ginny and her friends wouldn't let him tag along? Harry couldn't

think of anything. Maybe he'd just stay at Hogwarts. No, he wanted to go to Fred and George's new shop. So, he'd go alone then. Harry heard the door to one of the dorms open and close and he looked up at the stairs. There was Ginny, standing at the entrance of the girl's dorm looking at him curiously.

She turned to go back to her room, but Harry motioned that it was all right. "Hey, Gin," he said when she sat in the chair beside his.

"Hey, Harry. What are you doing up?" Harry was just about to ask her the same thing, but decided to answer her first.

"I couldn't sleep. Ron kicked me out of the room because I kept waking him up," he added lying. "He said that he needed his beauty sleep for his date today. What are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep either," she answered shyly. She paused for a moment then said, "I don't feel well."

"What's the matter?" Harry asked. She seemed to blush slightly and Harry wondered why.

"Oh, just a stomachache," she answered evasively. "Nothing to worry about. What were you dreaming about?"

Oddly, that question didn't bother Harry as much as it would have coming from Ron or Hermione. It was one of the reasons why Harry wanted to ask her out: he could talk to her about stuff. "Tonight, it was mainly the graveyard, but the Revelries showed up once or twice." He stood up to look into the fire. "It was bad enough living through that stuff once, but to re-live it every night...." He shook his head in disgust.

"Ask Madam Pomfrey for a Dreamless Sleep Potion," Ginny offered quietly.

"I did a little research," Ginny seemed surprised and impressed, "about that potion. It isn't recommended to take it regularly. I'll wait for nights I need sleep. Like before games or major tests." Harry glanced at Ginny. She seemed unsure about something, indecision was

written all over her face. "What's the matter, Gin?" She must have made up her mind, for it was now filled with determination.

She stood, crossed the space between them, and gently kissed Harry's lips. Harry was stunned. It was amazing. He was kissing a girl he really liked and she wasn't crying. Not only that, it was an incredible sensation. She broke away, tears filling her eyes. He then realized that he hadn't reacted to her in anyway. She turned and started to run to the stairs. Harry's long strides caught up to her quickly, within five feet of where they had kissed.

He grabbed her arm and tried to turn her around. She fought him, tears silently streaming down her face. "Gin, look at me," he begged her. Her body stopped fighting, but she wouldn't turn. That was fine with Harry, because months of strength building allowed him to turn her around easily. He lowered his head and kissed her, reaching around to hug her close to him.

She was surprised at first, but soon she reacted to his touch. They broke the kiss reluctantly and Harry led her back to the front of the fire. He stood facing her, staring at her surprised. He hadn't expected that. But he had to admit that it was a nice surprise.

"What was that for?" he finally asked her. She looked nervously at the floor. "I'm not mad, Gin. That's the best I've felt in awhile. I just wanted to know what it's for, 'cause I thought you got over me."

Ginny smiled and said quietly, "I thought so too. But watching you go through all of that trouble just to rescue Sirius reminded me of my first year. Which, in turn, reminded me why I liked you and showed me that I hadn't really gotten over you." She looked at him sheepishly. "I was glad Dean cheated on me, because it gave me a reason to dump him. I mean, it hurt but not as much as it could have." She looked back at the fire. "Why'd you run after me?"

It was Harry's turn to look at the ground sheepishly. "Gin, I've been meaning to ask you out for a little over a month now. But every time I've gotten close, I chickened out." He glanced up at her smiling face. "I was so surprised that you were actually kissing me that I didn't react." She was watching his face intently, and Harry smiled at her.

He continued, "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. And I also wanted to kiss you again," he added quietly. She leaned up and quickly brushed her lips against his.

"Thanks, Harry. And no need to apologize." He nodded and took her hand.

"Gin, would you like to go to Hogsmeade as my date today?" Harry didn't think she'd turn him down, but the butterflies were still fluttering in his gut.

"I would love to, Harry." Harry hugged her and tilted her face up so that he could look in her eyes. They were so beautiful and filled with love and comfort.

"I'm happy you said yes," he said, leaning down so that his lips would meet hers. They were happily kissing, when a loud angry voice startled them.

"Mr. Harry James Potter, what are you doing with my sister?" Ron jumped down the last few steps and sprinted towards them. They broke the kiss, but Harry kept her hand in his.

"Nothing, Ron! Nothing that you need to worry about," Ginny answered angrily.

Ron took a deep breath and started yelling again. "It sure didn't look like nothing, and it bloody well does concern me. I wake up to find my best mate," Harry didn't like the way he said that, "missing from his bed. I go downstairs to talk to him about his nightmares. To be nice, you know. I come down the stairs and find my best mate man-handling my little sister in front of the fireplace. Now, tell me how this doesn't affect me?"

"Ron, it was just a kiss," Harry said hurt. "I'd never do anything to hurt Gin, you should know that." He was getting a little angry with Ron for being so over-protective.

"Just a kiss? Just a kiss? Have you even thought about bothering to ask her out properly? And what's up with you calling her 'Gin'?"

"He just asked me out, Ron," Ginny answered, trying to placate him. "And I'm the one who made a move on him, not the other way around. Please apologize to Harry. He wasn't acting improperly."

"No, I want to know why he has been calling you 'Gin' all summer and only just got around to asking you out." Ron sat down in his normal chair and motioned for them to sit too.

Ginny sat, but Harry stood next to her chair. "I'm not sure why I started calling her that. It just felt right and we could talk about stuff. As for why I just asked her out, why did we go to the Yule ball with the Patil twins? Because we were too chicken to ask anyone else out sooner."

Ron shook his head and sat thinking for a moment. Harry watched as the anger seeped from his body. "Just don't let me catch you guys snogging again. I don't mind you dating her, Harry, but I don't need to watch you guys make out." Ron stood and walked up the stairs to their dorm.

"He's a pain in the rump," Ginny complained when he was gone. Harry laughed and pulled her up so that she was standing in front of him.

"At least he's there to be a pain." He kissed her again, running his finger through her long, loose hair. He broke the kiss and whispered in her ear, "Night, Gin." He pulled away and went to bed. He glanced over and noticed that Ron was pretending to sleep.

Harry woke up from four hours of dreamless sleep. He couldn't believe that Ginny had kissed him and he had asked her out. He was going to go to Hogsmeade with her. How lucky could he get? He got up, showered and dressed warmly for the chilly autumn day.

When he got to the Great Hall, he saw Ginny talking with her friends. She caught his eyes and smiled. She broke away from her group to walk over to where Harry sat, next to Ron and Hermione. She took the seat next to him and squeezed his hand excitedly. Then letting it go, she turned to Ron.

"You get your beauty sleep, Ron?" she asked innocently.

"It would have been a better night had I not caught you two kissing," he grumbled quietly and took another bite of his cereal.

"What's this?" Hermione asked curiously while suppressing her excitement for Ginny.

"Harry asked me out last night. We were kissing when this prat came downstairs, screaming like a banshee," Ginny answered scornfully. "I'm surprised he didn't wake everyone up."

"Oh, I'm glad he finally asked you," Hermione replied. "It was about time."

"Do girls always have to talk about us," Ron mumbled to Harry, "as if we aren't here?"

"I don't know, but it's really annoying," Harry replied, not truly meaning it. He reached over and grabbed Ginny's hand and held it. It managed to distract her quite efficiently.

When they were done eating, Harry and Ginny went to get their cloaks. Ron and Hermione were leaving right away because they had brought theirs to breakfast. They said goodbye and Harry hurried up the stairs with Ginny.

Once outside, Harry and Ginny walked down to the school gates silently. Harry wanted to hold her hand again, but he didn't have the courage to take it. He could face Voldemort, but he couldn't hold a girl's hand. He shook his head in despair. The irony of life amazed him at times.

"What's the matter?" Ginny asked, sensing his irritation.

"What?" He looked at her startled. "Oh, nothing. Just thinking that I was a fool for not having asked you out sooner." Ginny nodded, but he could tell she wasn't convinced. "What do you want to do, Gin?"

“Oh, let’s go to the twins’ shop first. I really want to see them and their new shop.” Harry nodded. “You guys talked a lot about it. Why?”

“You don’t know about the money I gave them?” Ginny shook her head no. “Well, I gave them my Triwizard prize. It was an investment into their joke shop. A pretty good investment by the looks of it.” They had just reached the brightly painted red building with a sign that read in huge red letters, outlined in black “Weasley Wizarding Wheezes.”

They entered the crowded shop and pushed their way to the front. The place was crammed with Hogwarts students from the third year up. Harry glanced around at all the products and was amazed. How did the twins manage to come up with all that’s in here?

“Ginny! Harry!” one of the twins shouted over the noise. “Follow me! Hey, Lee, take the counter for a moment!” Lee Jordan came out of an office in the back and started helping customers check out. A young witch was helping him.

“Much better,” the twin said after he had shut the door to the office. Harry couldn’t tell which one it was, but Ginny knew.

“Yes, much better, George. Where’s Fred?” George hit his head and went back into the hallway. He came back with Fred in tow.

“Hey, Ginny,” he said giving her a hug. George followed suit. “And Harry, our first investor. It is a huge honor to have you with us.” Fred shook his hand solemnly. George hit him over the head.

“We don’t have a lot of time, so don’t waste it being a fool.” Ginny and Harry smiled at each other. They knew George had hit Fred only because the opportunity had presented itself. “So what are you both doing in our humble business?”

“Just looking around,” Harry answered. Fred looked at the two of them and smiled knowingly.

“So what plans do you two have today?” Fred asked slyly. “Going to go to Madam Puddifoot’s after this?” Ginny and Harry both blushed, though Harry thought Ginny’s was one of anger.

“Don’t start, Fred. Or you, George. I’m sure mum would love to hear about your parties, all eight of them.” They both blanched.

“How’d you find out about those?” Fred asked surprised and a little worried.

“Katie Bell told us all about them,” she answered smoothly. “Anyways, you guys like Harry, so leave him alone.”

“So this is a date,” George said surprised. “Well, this a very romantic spot to take her, Harry. And a smart idea. If you had your date under the very noses of two of her brothers, then the other three can’t kill you.”

Harry thought for a second, adding up the Weasley boys. “Wait there’s six of you.”

“No,” Fred responded curtly, “the Prat doesn’t count.”

“He’s lost all rights to the Weasley brotherhood,” George continued.

“What’s he done now?” Ginny asked off-handedly.

“You guys hear about the vote of no confidence this week?” Fred answered annoyed. They both nodded. The department heads were reviewing Fudge’s behavior since the spring of Harry’s fourth year. If they found that he acted irresponsibly, they would vote for no confidence and have him removed.

“Well,” George continued, “Percy got caught removing files from Fudge’s office yesterday. He was going to destroy them.” Harry shook his head and Ginny sighed.

“They were notes from meetings Fudge had over the year. The Heads had asked for copies the day before.” Fred shook his head in disgust. “I don’t know why he didn’t come back and apologize when Voldemort’s return became public knowledge.”

“Well,” George said brightly, “we shouldn’t keep you love birds any longer. Besides, we must get back to business.”

Harry and Ginny left the shop embarrassed and uneasy about Percy. They entered different shops, but they couldn’t find anything to talk about. Harry couldn’t believe how uncomfortable it was. He’d never felt like this with Ginny. She and Hermione were always the two girls he could talk to. As they left the last shop on Main Street, Harry was frantically looking for something to talk about. They had been able to talk just this morning.

“You feeling better, Gin?” Harry asked, remembering why she had come downstairs in the first place.

“What?” she answered. She looked confused.

“You had a stomachache last night. I was wondering if you felt better.” Harry watched as a blush reddened her face. What was she embarrassed about?

“Oh, yeah. I feel much better, Harry. Thanks for asking.” They walked in an uncomfortable silence for a few minutes heading back up the street. “You sleep all right, when you went back to bed?”

“Yeah. It was a nice peaceful, dreamless sleep, the first time this school year and most of the summer,” Harry said quietly. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. He wanted to hold it as they walked, but she let go, so he couldn’t. “Want to get a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks?”

“Sure,” she said. They headed back and entered the crowded place. There was an empty table for two by the door, so they sat down.

“Hold the table, Gin. I’ll go get our drinks.” Harry left the table and went to the bar and bought two butterbeers. “Here you go, Gin. It’s on me.”

They sat in silence, both desperately trying to find something to talk about. After about ten minutes, Harry drank the last of his butterbeer and they still hadn’t found something to talk about. He ran his fingers

through his hair and sighed. Was something wrong with him? What was it about him that wouldn't let him be comfortable with a date?

"What's the matter, Harry?" Ginny asked slightly worried.

"Nothing," he answered automatically.

"Then why'd you rub your hand through your hair?" Harry looked at her startled, he'd done it without actually realizing what he had done.

"It was in my eyes," he lied. Harry knew that Ginny didn't buy it. If it were in his eyes, he would have just brushed it aside. He wouldn't have run his hand through it. They sat in very uncomfortable silence for a little bit and Harry noticed tears start to form in Ginny's eyes.

"What's the matter, Gin?" Harry asked concerned.

"Stop calling me that!" she yelled. Some of the closer people turned to watch, but Harry ignored them. "Answer me one question honestly, Harry." He nodded. "Do you like me?"

Do I like her? Harry thought to himself dumbfounded. Of course he liked her; he liked her a lot. He looked at all the people watching, for more had turned. He couldn't tell her that with so many eavesdroppers. He wanted to tell her that somewhere private, where he didn't need to worry about staring people or furious brothers.

He must have hesitated for too long, because she jumped up and ran out of the pub crying. That's happened to me on both of my dates, Harry thought. He sat there, stunned. He noticed that the crowd had turned away from him, embarrassed. What should he do? He noticed that Ginny had left her cloak. He could wait for her to return for it. But no, she wouldn't come back.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," the kind, scolding voice of Thia interrupted his thoughts. "If I had a knut for every time I saw your father left abandoned like that, I'd be a very rich witch."

"That's not helping me," Harry mumbled sullenly as Thia, Remus, and Tonks sat at the table, conjuring chairs and crowding around the small circle.

Remus smiled reminiscently, "That's what James told Thia every time he was abandoned. What happened?"

"Can we go talk else where?" Harry said getting up. He didn't want everyone listening.

"Harry, what happened?" Hermione said, pushing her way through the crowd, Ron in tow.

"Follow me," Remus said quickly and everyone got up to leave. Harry grabbed Ginny's cloak and followed him out the door. Remus led them up the path to the Shrieking Shack and over to a boarded up window. He pried one of the boards loose and they all entered.

"So, what happened?" Tonks and Hermione asked at the same time. Harry put his head in his head and sighed.

"We were ok, until we visited the twins. They were teasing us, which wasn't so bad, but then Percy got brought up. He got in some trouble yesterday and that seemed to... I don't know. We couldn't find anything to talk about after that. We looked through some shops and then headed back to the Three Broomsticks." He stopped, re-living those minutes again.

"We still couldn't find anything to talk about. She had said that she wasn't feeling well, earlier this morning, so I asked her how she was."

"Oh," Hermione said softly. "You didn't really, did you, Harry?" He nodded.

"She said it was a stomachache and I just wanted to know if she was better." Hermione gave Thia and Tonks a knowing looking and they both had to cover a smile. "What? What did I do wrong?"

“Harry, she’d kill me if I told you,” Hermione answered. “So you weren’t talking... What was she yelling about? I couldn’t hear the words.”

“She told me not to call her Gin and then asked me if I liked her. I didn’t want to tell her with everyone looking and listening. Then she ran off.”

“Harry,” Tonks said softly, “it looked like you were looking for a way out of the place. And you looked distressed.”

“Well, I was. I mean, I wasn’t looking for a way out, per se. But I was distressed. I like her, but I didn’t want everyone listening.”

Remus laughed, “You’re just like James with his crush. He’d go on and on to Sirius and I about Lily, but he always seemed to botch it up when she was around. Lily left him on so many of their dates, it surprised us all when he managed to keep her.” He put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Look, Harry. Go find her. Then tell her the truth. Make sure she knows that you’re telling the truth.”

“How am I going to find her?” Harry asked despairingly. “I don’t want to lose her. Not when I finally asked her out.”

“If you don’t tell her that I told you, I’ll tell you where she likes to go think,” Hermione bargained with him. Harry nodded. “She likes to think by the lake. There’s a log next to the water, where the lake goes under the castle. She’ll more than likely be there.” Harry got up and headed towards the window.

“Take it from a Marauder, Harry. It’s faster if you take the tunnel.” Harry nodded his thanks to Remus and went to the entrance of the tunnel and headed down it. “I can’t believe how much he’s like James, at least with girls. He’s had a crush on Ginny for a long time and he ruins the first date.”

Thia started to laugh. “James finally convinced Lily to go out with him, not that it was hard at that point, and he botched it all up. If it wasn’t for us... James was so hopeless with stuff like that.”

“Harry hasn’t had a crush on her for more than two months,” Ron said angrily.

“No, Ron. He liked her when I was teaching, he just didn’t know it until two months ago.” Remus and Thia nodded knowingly.

“How could you tell then?” Hermione asked.

“Remember what I told you?” Remus asked her. She looked slightly confused. “That day, the three were playing Quidditch?” She nodded. “Harry is very good at saying things without saying them. I lived with James for years and Harry has many of the same tell tale signs.” Thia interrupted him with a loud laugh.

“Thia, be quiet. I was pretty sure he liked her. If you had watched him at meals that year, it would have amazed you how many times Harry’s eyes traveled over to Ginny. And I bet he never noticed it. I knew for sure that day when they were flying. Lily and James used to fly a lot together. They were both on the Quidditch team and it was their favorite thing to do on dates.”

“They had perfected the art of flirting on brooms by the middle of fifth year,” Thia added happily. “Lily might have pretended to hate him, but really she was just disappointed in him. But it didn’t stop her from flirting once or twice.”

“Trust me,” Remus added. “He’s liked her for awhile. I’ll bet that it’s a little deeper than that.”

Harry was sprinting around the lake watching for the first sign of her. He saw her red hair first and stopped to catch his breath. She was crying. Her body was shaking from the sobs coming from her soul. Harry’s heart broke seeing her like that, and he knew that he had caused it.

He hesitantly walked over to her and draped her cloak over her shoulders. She looked up at him, but seeing who it was turned away. “You looked cold. I thought I should give this back.”

“How’d... how’d you find me,” she managed to sob out.

"Marauder's map. Up in the dorm." He had come up with that as he walked. He sat next to her and softly grabbed her chin. He turned her face until he could see her eyes. He gently rubbed the tears away.

"I'm sorry, Gin."

"Don't call m-me the-that," she said angrily.

"I'm going to call you that, so live with it, Gin," he told her with a smile. "I was wondering if I could have another shot at the question you asked me. I panicked with everyone watching us. Oh, please stop crying, Gin. I don't want to see you cry." This only made the tears fall harder. He tried to wipe them all off, but there were too many of them.

"I thought that you liked me," she started after a few minutes of deep breaths. "The way you held me last night and the way you always talked to me. But then you wouldn't answer the question and I knew I was wrong."

"Gin, am I a shy person?" Ginny looked at him surprised. "I want you to answer that."

"Yeah," she answered quickly, "you're one of the shyest people I know."

"Do you think a shy person would want to answer a question like that with everyone listening?" She shook her head. "Then how could you expect me to? Gin, I like you. I was too embarrassed to say that in the Three Broomsticks. But Gin, here I'll say it." He tilted her chin up and kissed her softly.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I should have known that." She wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder.

"Gin, I like you but I don't know how to show that," Harry said, looking out at the lake. "You're going to have to teach me how to show you. I don't know what it's like to have any other kind of love besides between friends. Ron and Hermione were the first people to show me that." Ginny looked up at him sadly. "Don't feel sorry for me, Gin."

Show me how to, I don't know... how to love." He stopped for a moment and lifted his arm from her back and ran it through his hair.

"I'm not sure what I feel for you. It's more than for my best mate's kid sister or for a friend. And it's not the same kind of crush I had for Cho. I don't know what it is."

Ginny held him tighter, her heart breaking with every word he said. How could everyone not see how love deprived Harry was? He didn't know how to act around her. Well, how was she going to teach him? She just knew, after years of living with her parents, she just knew. She'd try though.

They sat together in each other's arms until the sun set later that evening. They headed back up to the castle talking quietly about nothing at all. Harry had grabbed her hand as soon as they had stood, and she had glanced at it surprised. Every so often she would look at the joined hands in disbelief.

At the doors, Harry kissed her lips quickly and then her hand. They entered the school and heard the chatter from the eating students. Harry led her by the hand to the Great Hall and they entered. No one turned to look at them, but they saw Ron and Hermione smiling at them. Harry couldn't think of a happier time in his life.

Chapter Fourteen: Of Dueling, Training, Flying, Dating, and Dreaming

Where has my heart gone?
An uneven trade for the real world;
I want to go back to:
Believing in everything
And knowing nothing at all.
Evanescence: Field of Innocence

The next two weeks were some of the happiest of Harry's life. He and Ginny spent most of their free time together and were the topic among the gossipers. His classes were going well; he had even managed to get an O on his last potion. His training with Thia was great. They had spent a lot of the time Tuesday talking about his mum and dad. She told him about them, why they went out and why they got married.

Tonight was going to be the first dueling lesson in D.A. The members had decided that they'd meet on the weekends if that meant they'd get to the dueling sooner. Harry was a little apprehensive about teaching this; he wasn't that great at it yet. He had made sure that Thia was going to supervise this meeting so that she could help him out if needed. He thought he would need it.

"Good, evening everyone. Welcome to our first dueling lesson. First some rules. Do not use any spells that are overly harmful. Do not use any spells that you don't know the counter for. Do not interrupt another duel on purpose. Do not resort to physical attacks. Do not break these rules. If you do, I won't let you participate. If too many people break the rules, well, I'll stop teaching you this. Understood?" Everyone nodded.

"Good. We'll start then. Ron, would you help me demonstrate a duel?" He got up and walked to the front of the room. Tonight, Harry had required a larger room and this was exactly what he wanted. Ron, who had known about this, turned to face Harry. They bowed to each other, never taking their eyes off the other. They turned and walked five steps away from each other. Harry turned quickly and before Ron was ready shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

Ron got a shield up just in time and shot back the same spell. Harry saw it coming and dodged to the left. He raised his wand and yelled, "Furnuculus!" Ron didn't get out of the way and the spell hit his right cheek. A large boil appeared.

"Tarantallegra!" Ron shouted angrily at Harry. Harry decided to take the spell and started to dance when it hit him.

He pointed his wand at himself and whispered, "Finite." He turned towards Ron and yelled, "Stupefy!" The spell flew quickly, but Ron moved to the left, right into the path of a second stunner Harry had sent quietly right after the first one. Harry walked over to wake Ron up and heal the boil on his face.

The class clapped for the two and Harry saw Thia's small nod of approval. "Quiet, please." Everyone became silent. It always amazed Harry when they listened to him like that. "So, I'm guessing from your applause that you liked that." There were many nods. "What can you tell me about it?"

They looked at one another, not sure what he meant. "Let me explain myself, what did we do that was good and what did we do that was wrong?"

"That second stunner was a brilliant idea. That was a good idea." Harry nodded at the fifth year Slytherin.

"Correct. It was a gamble though. What if Ron had fallen the other way? How did I make sure Ron fell to the left of me?" Harry waited until everyone had given up. "Ron?"

"You shot it slightly to my right. If I would have fallen that way, I might still have hit it. So I went left and right into the second stunner."

"Good. That's something for the rest of you to think about. If you want your opponent to go somewhere, make it the most appealing choice. Anything else?"

“Ron didn’t turn quick enough,” Hermione said reproach filling her voice.

“No, he didn’t. But no one turns fast enough in a duel against a better dueler. Always try to be the first to cast a spell, whether it’s offensive or defensive. Anything else?”

“Why’d you take that spell?” Cho asked quietly.

“Because a shield charm costs more energy than just removing that spell once it hit. I knew how to end it and knew that once it hit I would be able to end it. In a short duel against a friend that’s not that important, but in a battle it is.” After that he had them duel, two at a time and he watched them closely. They followed the rules with a few exceptions. He was surprised when the Slytherins were the only house not to break the rules. Temper was the major reason that the other houses broke the rules. Or, more particularly, the lack of control over said temper. But before he knew it, it was eight and time for them to go.

“Well, everyone, good night. We’ll meet sometime next week. Cho, Zachariah and Katie if you’d stay for a bit.” They talked about Quidditch practices and figured out the best times for the next meeting. Katie and Harry walked back the common room talking about their team.

The next day was Saturday and Harry had a lesson with Thia at ten that morning. He got up as early as normally did and dressed for a run. When he got back, hardly anyone was up. He showered and then went down to eat. He waited until Ginny joined him and talked to her while she ate. They walked back to the dorm and played a game of chess. She beat him soundly and Harry pretended to pout. Ginny got up and left him, pretending to be disgusted by him. He got up and caught up to her. Hardly anyone was in there, so Harry kissed her.

“I thought my one rule about you two dating was that I couldn’t catch you kissing,” Ron said grumpily right next to them. It startled them and they jumped apart. Ron smiled happily.

"Well, if that's the way you're going to play, Ron Weasley," Harry said as Ron kissed Hermione good morning. "I don't want to catch you snogging my sis either." Hermione smiled at Harry happily and then mockingly at Ron.

Ron grumbled something unintelligibly and then said, "Fine," with his usual morning cheerfulness. They sat talking for a long time, but it was soon 9:45 so Harry said bye.

"Ron, turn and look the other way," Ginny said sweetly to her brother. When he didn't, she mumbled, "Prat." She wrapped her arms around Harry and kissed him soundly. Harry felt his hands slip into her hair and loved the feel of it. Unfortunately, the common room was filling up again and Dean and Seamus entered the room. They took one look at the kissing couple and started cat calling. Harry broke the kiss reluctantly and glared at his roommates. He hugged Ginny and whispered, "Bye, Gin," in her ear.

Ten minutes later he was outside the door of the Dark Arts classroom. He entered it and saw, to his surprise, Remus looking at the Wall. Thia was standing next to him, pointing out some photos. "Hey," he said to let them know that he was here.

"Hey, Harry," Thia said happily. "Remus is here to help today. We're hoping that he'll be able to come every weekend when there isn't a full moon. We didn't think you'd mind."

"No, it's great to see you, Remus." He looked at the Wall. It had grown ever so slowly over the weeks. Voldemort was getting active; there was a Revelry at least once a week. Many of the pictures were cut outs from the paper that Harry put up. Others were photos of lost family members. "What are we doing today?" he asked turning away from the photos.

"The normal, but you're going to duel both of us, one at a time. The other is going to watch and comment after. Alright?" Harry nodded.

"Who's first?" Harry asked eager to get started.

"I am," Remus said stepping forward. The duel was short, even by Harry's standards. Remus had the upper hand the whole time and could have ended it at any moment he wanted. Harry awoke groggy from the stunner that had hit him.

"What'd I do wrong?" Harry asked once his mind cleared.

"Nothing much, Harry," Thia answered overly cheery. "Remus is levels above you and he didn't dumb it down like he was supposed to, the git," she said hitting his shoulder.

"You dumb it down?" Harry asked her surprised.

"Of course I do, Harry," she said smiling. "Not as much as I would for any of your classmates, but I do. I always stay several steps ahead of a student. I'm never leaps and bounds beyond them; it doesn't help them much in the long run. Now, one thing I noticed though..." Harry listened to her recount the short fight, picking it apart, telling him how to improve his odds against a tougher opponent.

"Thia, your turn," Remus said once she was finished. The duel between Harry and Thia lasted longer, but not by much. Once they were done and Harry revived, Remus went through it carefully. He not only told Harry what to do differently, but he gave Thia directions also. She put up with it; Remus was the older one, so she was used to it.

After that, Thia quizzed him on all the spells that he had learnt so far this year. She did that every so often so that he wouldn't forget them. Harry was surprised at how easy he found remembering these spells to be. He had noticed that his memory had been improving over the past few weeks. At the end of the training session, the three of them sat down to drink a cup of tea, as was Thia and Harry's custom.

"So what do you think?" Remus asked Harry quietly.

"Does he know?" Harry asked Thia instead. She nodded and a shadow passed over Remus' face.

"Your father told me," Remus said quietly, "when he gave me that box with the rings. Sirius had already known. Your dad never thought about telling Peter, which was a blessing in disguise I suppose."

"Harry, have you opened your mum's gift?" Thia asked him. Harry looked at her and shook his head. He hadn't thought about it much over the past month and a half. "Why not?" she asked curiously.

"I don't know. It never feels like the right time. At first it was because I never could find a time to be alone at the Weasleys'. Then school started and I had to get in the swing of things. I was learning to balance everything all of September. Now, well," a faint blush rose on his cheeks, "I haven't thought about it much 'cause of... stuff."

"You mean, your girlfriend?" Remus asked. The faint color deepened to a nice rosy red. "Molly was thrilled when she heard the news. If Ginny had rejected you that day, I think Molly would have come to Hogwarts herself and knocked some sense into the girl," Remus added with a chuckle. "How is it going?"

"It's great," Harry answered shyly, but truthfully.

"They're the talk of Hogwarts, Remy," she told her brother with a huge smile. "Always holding hands when they're together. Both have been caught writing notes to the other in class." Harry felt his cheeks burn from the blush now. Snape had loved catching Harry reading one note Ginny had written him. Snape had enjoyed reading it out loud even more. As for writing notes, well, he had written it after a Dark Arts test and Thia hadn't said much about it. "They sneak peeks in the hallways when they think no one's looking. Peeves has even written a little ditty for them." She sighed romantically and Remus burst out laughing.

"Shut it, Remus. I'm happy, even with that stupid song," Harry said loudly. He had started controlling his temper better since the night the Burrow was attacked. He shouldn't be angry anyway, but Thia had been teasing him endlessly about the rumors.

"Oh, I'm not really laughing at you, Harry. Did Peeves just change the first names? I don't think he rhymed Evans with anything," Remus

asked Thia between his laughs. She nodded. "Oh, Harry, I'm sorry about that song. Sirius and I helped Peeves write it for your mum and dad after they became an item. We did it to get back at James for something he'd done to us, I can't remember what though."

"He had put a dye in their shampoo bottles," Thia remarked casually. "Their hair was green for a week and a half. Sirius had been particularly furious about that because he especially hated that color. That was, of course, the reason James picked it."

"Lily hated that song. She was madder than James was about it. You and her got us good, though," he said to Thia.

"What'd they do?" Harry asked when neither elaborated. Thia gave Remus a questioning look, but he nodded.

"I've always wondered how Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff had convinced the other two guys that girls were more trustworthy than the boys," she said thoughtfully. "We snuck into their room and charmed all of their undergarments. They couldn't go under clothes, so they jumped a layer and Remus and Sirius had to wear them on the outside."

"Couldn't you take them off and go commando?" Harry asked Remus.

"Nah, Lily and Thia thought of that," Remus said fondly. "If we tried to take the pants off, the underwear would jump back a layer and not come off. So we were stuck until they told us the counter-charm."

"And they had to pay for that charm." Thia smiled at Remus. "In the end, we made them do a runway walk in the common room that night. And they promised not to prank Lily or I in return." Thia was laughing hard. Remus couldn't stop smiling.

"What'd you do to them?" Harry asked, knowing that there had been some kind of retaliation.

"Now, Harry," Remus said laughing and shaking his head, "if we do this, we'd be talking for weeks. Whatever started that prank war had happened in the first year and never ended until James and Lily died,

Sirius sent to Azkaban, and Thia and Peter disappeared, believed dead. So how's school?"

"Fine. I like the classes. Even Potions surprisingly." Harry thought for a moment. "It helps that Snape isn't breathing down our necks though. If he wasn't ignoring us, I don't think I'd like it that much. Our Defense teacher is almost as brilliant as our third year Defense teacher. She's good though." Harry thought for a moment. "What's up with the investigation of Fudge?"

"Oh, he's delaying it," Remus said rolling his eyes. "Percy took the blame for the smuggling, though we all know that he was working under orders. That little trial slowed it down for a bit. At the moment, the Ministry is planning something and it's keeping some of the Heads too busy to get to the meetings. Completely by chance, Fudge has just as many Heads busy so the investigation has to stop. If a certain amount is missing they can't meet. It's a mess, but it only makes it more obvious that he needs to be removed. Once the Heads can meet and finish the paper work they need, they'll have him out of there with a replacement in until Britain's wizarding community can vote on it officially."

"Molly took Percy's crime badly. She has no idea what she did wrong with him, but it's not her fault," Thia said shaking her head. "It's just something in Percy's personality. My turn to ask a question," Thia said brightly. She started to say something, but Remus stopped her.

Instead he asked, "Why'd you add all those pictures of people you don't know?"

"Cause, I feel like I know some of them because I watched them die," Harry answered quietly. This time Remus tried to say something, but Thia stopped him. "The others deserve to be remembered. The students need to realize just how much suffering Voldemort continues to causes, to everyone." Harry shook his head.

"Do you have trouble sleeping?" Thia asked worried. He looked up at her startled. "It's not that hard to tell, Harry. Every one of your teachers have remarked about how tired you look to me at one point or another."

"Yeah, nightmares," he said looking at his shoes. "I think I need to go. I promised Ginny, Ron, and Hermione that I'd be back in the common room in time to walk with them to lunch." Harry got up and left, noticing the look that Remus and Thia exchanged.

The next week's weather took a turn for the worse. The rain came down hard; it almost seemed like a never-ending sheet of water was falling from the sky. The wind was blowing hard; it was difficult to even walk straight for a few feet. And of course, Harry and Katie decided that the Quidditch team still needed to practice. Their first game against Slytherin was just about a month away and both captains had decided that the practice would be good if they played in the rain.

"I thought you said we weren't practicing in thunderstorms," Ginny complained to Harry as thunder boomed outside.

"I never said that. What I said was that I wouldn't make you practice everyday in it," Harry answered putting a charm on his glasses so that he could see in the rain.

"No, mate," Ron said grumpily. "You said that you wouldn't take after Wood and it sure feels like you are." They were now standing at the entrance to the pitch looking out at the field.

"Must you all complain?" Katie asked testily. "Just because there's a little rain doesn't mean we have to cancel practice."

"You call that a little rain," Sloper said, pointing out at the pitch. "You can't even see the grass through the rain."

"It's nothing," Harry said rolling his eyes. "I've played in worse conditions. Now, everyone mount and get out there."

Practice went well considering the weather. The wind blew the quaffle all over the pitch and the Chasers were literally chasing after it. Harry had no chance of seeing the snitch, so they hadn't even released it. He didn't want to run the risk of losing it. Instead he worked with the

Beaters, because the bludgers still worked fine in the weather. Finally, after a peal of thunder Katie whistled for the end of practice.

“Just a little rain,” Ron mumbled peeling the wet clothing from him. “I’ll be lucky if I ever dry out.”

“I’m sure Hermione knows something to help you out,” Harry said thoughtfully. “I wonder if there’s some charm that could withstand a cold rainy game and still keep us warm and dry.”

“Do we have practice tomorrow?” Kirke asked carefully.

“Why would we?” Harry asked after he pulled his head through his school robe. “We never practice two days in a row. Though maybe we should,” he added thoughtfully. “Hey, Katie,” he yelled to the girl’s side of the changing room, “Hufflepuff cancelled their practice right!”

“Yeah, why?” she yelled back.

“Cause Kirke wants to practice tomorrow and we should if we can get the pitch.”

“I never said that,” Kirke yelled. “I was just wondering.”

“Isn’t the D.A. meeting tomorrow?” Ginny’s voice said. Harry heard Ron, Kirke, and Sloper sigh in relief.

“Yeah, but I can always move it.” Harry smiled at the looks on their faces. Oh, sometimes he loved authority. He met Katie in the main part of the locker room and they exchanged smiles. The other team members were staring grumpily at the two.

“We’ll, quit, Harry,” Ginny said forcefully. “And you don’t want your girlfriend pissed at you.”

“Oh, in that case,” Harry said pretending to be frightened. “I don’t think we can practice tomorrow. I can’t have her mad at me.”

“Oh, but I disagree, Harry,” Katie said thoughtfully. “The way she was flying today, well, I think that she needs to practice. Maybe everyone

but her can have the day off, but Ginny needs it.” Ginny stuck out her tongue and started to storm out of the locker room.

“Wait, Gin,” Harry caught up to her. He embraced her, hearing Ron’s groan of disgust, and leaned his mouth next to her ear. “How about I move the D.A. meeting and everyone else but you and me can have practice? We’ll stay nice and dry in the Room of Requirement.” She giggled and nodded.

“But that’s not very fair, Harry. Why do they have to practice?” she asked motioning to the team members just a few feet away. Harry turned her around to face him.

“Because, otherwise Ron and Hermione would be using it.” Harry laughed at the disgusted sound Ginny made at the thought of her brother and his girlfriend making out.

“Harry, Ginny, if you’re done?” Katie asked impatiently. “We won’t have practice tomorrow. Get warm, eat well, and sleep a lot. ‘Til next Monday, everyone.” She left, followed by Natalie, Kirke, and Sloper.

“Do you guys have to do that in front of me?” Ron asked slightly nauseated. Harry and Ginny had leaned together for a kiss once the door shut behind Sloper.

“No,” Ginny said breathlessly. “You could leave and give us some privacy.” She kissed Harry again, running her fingers through his hair. Harry loved it when she did that; it felt so calming.

“And leave you with him?” Ron asked, trying to keep his supper down. “I don’t think so. I’m not leaving until you both do.”

“Ron, I won’t do anything to hurt her,” Harry said, blushing slightly when his voice broke. “If you can’t trust me, who can you trust?”

“It’s not really you I’m worried about, Harry,” Ron said apologetically. He was happy now, because they were heading back up to the castle. Talking on the way up was impossible, so he had to wait until they arrived in the Entrance Hall to finish his thought. “I’m worried about

what Ginny would do to you now that she has you.” Ginny punched him hard and pulled Harry down a corridor.

“You want to do something this weekend? I don’t know what, with the weather the way it is, but...” she trailed off, slightly worried by the expression on Harry’s face.

“Sure,” he said after a moment. “I think I even have a plan. Do you trust me?” She nodded. “Good. Meet me here at 5:30 Saturday evening and don’t eat.”

They kissed goodbye, Ginny left for the common room and Harry went to talk with Dobby about dinner Saturday night.

“Do you trust me?” Harry asked her that Saturday evening. The weather was still horrible, so Harry had gone through with his plan. He had managed to keep it from Ginny since the Tuesday they had arranged for it.

“Harry, you know I do,” Ginny answered angrily. She wasn’t too happy with Harry for keeping this a secret. She hated not knowing things and Harry knew that.

“Then put this blindfold on. And don’t try to cheat. Fred and George charmed it somehow to do something if you cheat.” Ginny glared at him, but Harry just smiled. She slipped it on and slipped her hand into his. “Follow me.” Harry took her up several staircases and down countless corridors until he reached the entrance to the Room of Requirement. “Stay right here and don’t take that blindfold off.” He paced three times past the bit of wall where the door would appear. He thought of the place he had created the other day and on the last turn saw a wonderfully carved wooden door appear.

He slipped his hand into hers again and led her through the door. Dobby followed them in, surprisingly quiet, and placed the picnic supper near Harry and left.

Harry stood behind Ginny and carefully took the blindfold off. He slid it from her face and heard her gasp in amazement. They were on top of an extremely high cliff. The land continued to go for as far as the

eye could see in front of them. To their right and down hundreds of feet was an ocean; they could just hear its roar. And to their left was the world stretched out beneath them. Dead center between the two edges was an old oak tree, its branches spread far and wide. The sun was high in the sky, there was little wind, and the temperature was just right. Harry had thought of this place and knew he'd be coming here to think from now on.

"It wonderful, Harry," Ginny whispered in amazement.

"Then you like it?" Ginny hit him and went to look out at the land, looking at the farms, forests, villages, and towns that made a checker board out of it.

Harry spread out the blanket under the tree and laid out the meal. They were all of Ginny's favorites. "Come, eat, Gin." Harry and Ginny laughed throughout the whole meal and enjoyed the food immensely. They were now sitting, Harry leaning against the tree and Ginny with her head in his lap. She was holding his hand and stroking it absently. Harry was brushing her silky hair with his fingers.

"How'd you think of this place, Harry?" Ginny asked after several minutes of silence.

"Oh, well, I like high places, so I knew it would have to be a cliff. I love looking at pictures of the ocean, but I've never been there. That's why there's the ocean." He motioned vaguely to the right. "But flying high over England the summer before fifth year made me appreciate the view from the sky. So that's why there's land," he said motioning to the left. "The tree's for shade and the weather is wonderful." He leaned down and kissed her slightly opened lips. "I'm glad you like it."

"I love it!" Ginny said, pulling his neck back towards her and they kissed briefly. "And Hermione was worried you'd be clueless about finding a place to have a date." They both laughed and sat in silence. "Why do you like heights? Or, rather, why'd this have to be a cliff?" she asked running her fingers along his leg.

"I love heights. I think best in the air." He paused for a moment. "The hardest thing about Umbridge's ban wasn't that I couldn't play

Quidditch. It was that I couldn't fly. I started to climb the Astronomy Tower last year to think, but now, I think I'm going to come here." Harry traced her jawbone and felt her shiver when he tickled her.

"Don't tickle me," she said, feigning anger. They sat the rest of the evening in silence, just enjoying the other's presence. They packed up the picnic and went to the door. It stood in the middle of nowhere, seeming to lead to nowhere, but when Harry opened the door, Hogwarts castle was on the other side.

They said goodnight at the bottom of the dorm steps and Ginny headed straight to bed. Harry walked over to where Hermione and Ron were sitting in one of the larger chairs together. "So I couldn't find a decent place to take her on a date, could I?" Harry asked Hermione.

"So you did. Well, I'm impressed. Where'd you take her?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Ask her yourself; I'm sure she'll spill the beans to all of you fifth, sixth, and seventh year girls." Hermione nodded, kissed Ron goodnight, and followed Ginny upstairs.

"Why'd you have to go and make her leave?" Ron asked complaining.

"Cause I enjoy watching you two cuddling as much as you enjoy watching me and Gin cuddle." Harry laughed at the face Ron pulled and sat across from him. They played one game of chess and Harry told him the basics of the date. They were the only two up (it was about eleven) and they enjoyed being alone to talk. It had seemed like a long time since they had had a chance to talk. But, Harry never broached the one topic he wanted to talk about now: the Prophecy. He had decided earlier in the week that he was ready to tell them. However, he couldn't figure out how.

"Reckon we should go to bed," Ron said yawning. Harry nodded and followed him up the stairs. They changed silently and mumbled goodnights. Harry climbed into bed and pulled the curtain around him.

"I'm here to collect a debt, Jones. Do not make your brats pay for you." Voldemort's high cold voice rang in the quiet house. The only sounds were the crying of three young children; Harry thought the oldest couldn't be more than eight. They were hurt, tortured by the Death Eaters surrounding them. "If you can not tell me where the location of the headquarters for that little resistance group the fool Dumbledore started, I'm going to kill your brats."

Hestia Jones started to cry. "Please, don't kill them. They don't deserve to die. Just kill me and my husband." The man, lying next to her, nodded in agreement. "You know we can't tell you, even if we had wanted to."

"Wrong answer. Bella, kill the brats." Three quick spells and the three children were dead, never to feel the pain again.

Hestia and her husband stared at them shocked. Neither was sobbing, they couldn't. "Now," Voldemort started, "is there a spy?" Neither would answer him. No matter what the Death Eaters tried, they couldn't get them to speak. After about an hour of torturing them, Voldemort raised his hand for them to stop. They did, quickly.

"Kill them. Cut off a finger from each body, the smallest finger, and send them to the fool." Voldemort turned and exited the building. He waited for them to join him and then blasted the Dark Mark into the sky.

Harry woke in a cold sweat. He couldn't believe what he had just seen. He changed into some robes and walked to Dumbledore's office trembling. He knocked on the door, causing the voices inside to quiet. "Come in."

Harry entered and there was a stunned silence. Dumbledore recovered quickly and conjured a chair for Harry to sit in. Harry vaguely noticed everyone in the room, there seemed to some sort of meeting going on.

The Order members in the room were surprised at the appearance of the boy. Not only the fact that he was in the room, but the way he looked. He was as white as any ghost and seemed just as

transparent. His face showed nothing of the emotions inside, but his eyes told it all. He was dealing with pain, grief, horror, and fear. He was deep within the realm of shock.

Finally, Dumbledore found his voice. "Is there something I can do for you, Harry? We are in the middle of a meeting and many here need to go to bed for work tomorrow." Harry looked around hoping to see Hestia sitting in one of the chairs.

"I-is Hestia here, sir?" Harry asked quietly, his eyes focused on a spot right above the headmaster's head.

"No, she never showed up for the meeting." Harry looked at the ground feeling despair grab hold of him. "Why?" the headmaster asked quietly.

"Voldemort," there were several gasps, but Harry couldn't be bothered to wonder why, "he, he..." A hand rested on his shoulder and Harry looked up. Remus was standing next to him. He nodded at Harry, lending the boy his strength. "Voldemort attacked her house tonight."

There were several people who disagreed with him loudly, these were people who didn't know or didn't believe in the connection Harry had with Voldemort. "We weren't told about that," someone said angrily. Harry thought the man was angry with him, for he couldn't see that the man was staring at a figure standing in the shadows.

"Everyone, be quiet and let Harry continue," Dumbledore said loudly over the noise. The room fell silent quickly. "What did he do there, Harry? Please tell me as much as you remember."

Harry looked at him pleading with the old man not to have to relive it. Harry knew better than to hope for that, but he did anyways. When Dumbledore nodded for Harry to continue and Remus squeezed his shoulder, Harry took a deep shuttering breath. "I had stayed up late talking with Ron. We went to bed about," Harry glanced at his watch, "an hour and a half ago." He was surprised that it was only an hour and a half later; it seemed like days. "As soon as I fell asleep the vision came. Death Eaters surrounded three children and they were

crying. Voldemort said something about a debt and then asked for the location of Grimmauld Place.”

“He knew the name of Headquarters?” Mr. Weasley asked alarmed. Harry turned towards him and shook his head no.

“No, he called it the headquarters of Dumbledore’s resistance. She wouldn’t tell him, so he had Bellatrix kill the kids. She and her husband went into shock, I think. Voldemort asked for the name of the spy, but they wouldn’t talk. The Death Eaters tried to torture it out of them, but Hestia and her husband never said another word. Voldemort told the Death Eaters to kill them and... and...” Harry couldn’t say it. Just then there was a tap on the window. Dumbledore waved his wand at it and it opened. A pitch-black bird flew in and placed a box on his desk. It then flew out the way it came. Harry knew what was in the box. Dumbledore read the note and grimaced. “Please don’t open that,” he said quietly. He didn’t beg or whine, but everyone could tell he didn’t want to see what was in there.

“What’s in there?” Moody asked warily. “I can’t see what’s in it. Is it dangerous, Harry?” Harry shook his head no and Dumbledore opened it. Harry looked out the window and so missed the look that passed over Dumbledore’s face. He placed the lid back on the box and shook his head in disgust.

“What is it, headmaster?” McGonagall asked from her seat.

“The note said that it was a gift. Voldemort sent me the fingers of all five of the Joneses.” There was a shocked silence. “You knew that, Harry?” He nodded. “Harry, I think you need to go back to bed.”

“Why didn’t you guys know about this?” Harry asked quietly. Everyone saw that the shock had worn off and was replaced with anger and determination. Only Thia and Remus recognized it as the look he wore as he looked at the Wall.

“Because,” the oily voice said from the shadows, “the Dark Lord does not trust me at the moment. He tells me nothing about attacks on the Order. He tells me next to nothing,” Snape added bitterly.

Harry nodded. He had expected that answer. "How old were the kids?" Harry asked quietly.

"The oldest was seven, almost eight, one was four and the other was barely one," Mrs. Weasley whispered between her sobs.

"He's going to pay for this," Harry whispered. The only ones to hear him were Remus and Dumbledore and both exchanged looks of worry. "I think you're right, Headmaster. I need to return to my bed. Goodnight, or hopefully a better one. See you tomorrow Remus and Thia. Goodbye, everyone."

Harry walked out and no one recognized him as the boy who had entered the office just thirty minutes ago. It seemed that he had matured and grown into a man. They knew as much about the Prophecy as Voldemort did and if this boy was the answer to their prayers, they would and could put their trust in him. The door shut behind him and Dumbledore looked at Remus sadly.

"How long has he been like that?" Dumbledore asked worriedly.

"Seeking revenge?" Remus asked and Dumbledore nodded. "For a long time, Albus. But it's not why he fights. He fights for his living friends."

"No, Remy," Thia corrected him, "he fights for all of those living. If he gets revenge on the side, well, he won't complain about that. Why do you ask, Headmaster?"

"Because of what Harry said after he found out about their ages," Dumbledore replied, a deeply pensive look on his face. Almost in a voice that wasn't meant to be heard by the others, Dumbledore added, "Harry said, 'He's going to pay for this,' and it worries me."

"Just remember, Voldemort killed his parents when he was one and tried to kill him at the same time," Thia said thinking. "I'm not sure, but I think Harry's more angry about the kids' deaths than Hestia's."

Chapter Fifteen: Not All Anniversaries Should be Celebrated /u

i I don't remember how I felt.
I never thought I'd live
To read about myself
In my hometown paper.
How my brave young life
Was forever changed.
Bruce Springsteen: Nothing Man /i /center

Harry wandered the castle trying to calm his mind, though this was easier said than done. Harry couldn't believe that Voldemort could kill children so easily. He just ordered their death and Bellatrix followed through. At least their parents had made the choice to fight; those kids were neither a threat nor an enemy.

Why was it that every good night Harry had, some vision had to ruin it? For the rest of his life he would remember this night, not because of the wonderful time he had had with Ginny, but as the day the Jones' family was killed.

He found himself entering the Room of Requirement through the ornately carved wooden door again. He stood looking out to sea, just inches from the edge. The ocean held so much power and yet was contained by the boundaries of the land. What boundaries did Voldemort have that Harry could use to his advantage?

He couldn't think of any. It was Harry's luck to be destined to fight the most powerful Dark Wizard alive. How was he going to do this? He'd need to come up with some plan, some way to win. Harry wanted to win, now more than ever. He still wasn't sure about what he felt for Ginny, love was too new of an emotion for him, but he couldn't imagine a life without her somewhere in it. And he wanted a long life spent with his friends. He would have to find a way to destroy Voldemort and survive.

Harry had required the room to be as dark as the night outside and six hours from dawn, just as it was in the real world. That meant that the sky was filled with stars. Hundreds of thousands of them, too

many to even try to count. He stood in awe of the hugeness of the universe. The moon was almost full; Remus would be turning into a werewolf next week.

Harry wondered how Remus got up every morning and lived with all the hostility towards him. How did he survive with the pain of turning into a werewolf? It was one of the many reasons Harry respected him so much. That and he was the best teacher he had ever had; though Thia was a close second.

How had she and Sirius fallen for each other? How had she gotten Sirius to tie the knot? Harry had a hard time thinking of Sirius being married to anyone, not even to Thia. What had brought the two of them together? What had made her pretend to be dead? And what in the world had she been doing all these years?

As usual, his time thinking only brought up questions, some new but most old. He hardly found any answers. It was more than a little annoying. What he would give for an answer to just one of his questions.

Harry sat on the edge and looked out over the ocean. After several hours the horizon was tinged with pink. Slowly but surely the sun made its appearance directly in front of Harry. Because of the properties of the room, Harry found that he could stare directly into the sun and not be blinded. The sun was up and rising into the sky when Harry finally shook himself out of his thoughts and went to the common room.

center /center

Everyone was excited that week, because Halloween was on Friday. The castle was decorated and everyone was talking excitedly about the feast. No one noticed that Harry was a little quieter than normal, no one but Ginny, that is.

It worried her, but Ron had told her that Harry was best left alone until he was ready to talk. And with her experiences with him, she found the advice to be sound. So she waited for him to talk and was next to him with support and comfort whenever she could.

That Friday's paper told everyone why Harry wasn't as excited about the day as they were. The front page held a picture of a redheaded woman, a black haired man, and both were holding a toddler boy. center b Fifteenth Anniversary of the Downfall of the Dark Lord /b

i by Vachel Mente /i

Just fifteen short years ago today, the Dark Lord met his match in the young baby, Harry Potter. It is a name that we are all familiar with, a name that commands the respect of those on the side of light. We celebrated for days after the rumors were first confirmed. We raised our glasses to the Boy Who Lived.

But we must not forget that fifteen years ago today, the Dark Lord killed James and Lily Potter, Harry's young parents. Both heavily involved with the fight against the Dark Lord, they had the honor to be one of the few to escape the Dark Lord three times. And yet, tragically, they did not survive the fourth meeting.

How Harry Potter survived this curse is a mystery to this reporter and to all in the field of Defense. He survived the un-survivable curse and has escaped from the Dark Lord's clutches several times in his short life. He lived to warn the wizarding world about the return of the Dark Lord, but to our great misfortune his warnings fell on deaf ears. The Minister Cornelius Fudge started a shameless smear campaign against Harry Potter and Professor Dumbledore, Headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

But last spring, the Dark Lord appeared inside of the Ministry of Magic and not even the Minister could ignore the fact any longer. He will forever go down in history as the Minister who stepped aside and allowed the Dark Lord to rise again. And the Minister is still now diverting our attention from the more important concerns.

This reporter was strongly recommended to write for you, the readers, the story of Harry Potter. And I've done that. I was also recommended to write about the tragedy of James and Lily's death; I've done that. I was recommended not to mention Minister Fudge's slip up, but I decided to ignore that. And I was told in no uncertain terms not to write about the Vote of No Confidence.

This reporter wants to tell the people, his readers, about the devious nature and political maneuvering Minister Fudge is capable of. When I was given these recommendations about what to write in this story, not once was Minister Fudge's name mentioned, except in relationship to the Vote of No Confidence. And yet, I went away from that meeting knowing that it was a message from Minister Fudge. He is once again leaning on the Prophet to print what he wants printed and this time the Prophet isn't leaning with him.

Minister Fudge has spent the last month keeping the Heads of the Departments busy preparing for a secret event. Ironically, this kept the investigation at a stand still, because the minimum number of Heads needed to conduct it was missing. This secret event is a celebration of the fall of a Dark Lord who has risen again and grown powerful again because of Minister Fudge's inability to act.

I have taken offence at this show of tactlessness. On the day Harry Potter mourns the death of his parents, the Minister expects us to celebrate the fall of a re-arisen Dark Lord? I encourage you to write to any member of the Ministry that you know and have them encourage their Head to Vote for No Confidence and have a new, stronger, smarter Minister established. /center

Harry stared at the picture of his parents and the article that followed. He couldn't believe that they had printed that. Since when did the Daily Prophet go against the Ministry?

So, that was Fudge's secret event. Well, it's just the thing to do if you want to piss off a Dark Lord. Maybe that's what Fudge wants, so that he can act the hero. He could have the title, for all Harry cared.

He saw several people give him odd looks. Others were openly staring. Harry couldn't deal with that, not today. He said a hurried goodbye to his friends, squeezed Ginny's hand one more time (he still wasn't comfortable kissing her with more than five people around) and walked out of the Great Hall. He walked with his head held high and no tears in his eyes. He hadn't cried just for his parents in years, those tears were spent. He felt the stares follow him all the way down the Gryffindor table.

When he reached the doors, several Slytherins blocked his way. They didn't bother Harry though. It was Blaise, Sephra, Edlyn and a crowd of others. Blaise stuck his hand out and Harry shook it, slightly confused.

"That's a load of rubbish," he said, pointing at the Prophet that Sephra was holding. "It's true about Fudge and his crap, but the rest, well, it a load of rubbish."

"We know you hate the attention, Harry, and yet you seem to get it no matter what you do to avoid it," Sephra continued. "They make it sound so easy, so wonderful. Just write a letter and Fudge is gone. It's not that easy. If it was, the Heads would have removed him weeks ago."

"This celebration," Edlyn said disgusted, "is stupid. It's only going to make Voldemort angry and that's not what we need at the moment. You can bet the Death Eater spies found out about it and he's been plotting his revenge."

"All it does," Blaise said, taking over, "is make you a target. Puts you on a pedestal. If you're the wizarding world's saving light, then Voldemort will target you. How is that repaying your hero?"

"We like you," Edlyn said quietly. "You're a good teacher, very patient. You accept those who most people would turn their nose up at. You forgive and forget. And they've made you a target." Harry realized

that the entire Hall was listening and that Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had come up behind him. The only reason he had noticed any of that, was because Ginny had slipped her hand into his.

“Harry,” Blaise continued, “I can’t speak for every member of Slytherin, but for those behind me, well, we’ll support you in your battles. You just ask us and we’ll be there for you.” He held out his hand and Harry shook it. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he said motioning to the picture on the front. “It’s a lot to fight for though.”

“Nah,” Harry spoke for the first time in this exchange. “It’s for those around me that I fight. Nothing can bring them back, but I can fight to keep those alive to stay that way. That’s what I fight for, but thanks for your support. I really appreciate it. You have no idea how much it means to me.”

center /center

That day ended slightly early so that everyone could get ready for the feast that night. The feast would start early this year, because Dumbledore had booked a surprise for the students. No one knew what it was, though.

Harry went to his dorm room to change, but couldn’t get the feeling of dread to lift from his mind. He didn’t have a good feeling about tonight. The celebration for the downfall of Voldemort would take place in Diagon Alley at the same time as the feast. Throughout the day, people had given Harry their condolences, but it had only annoyed Harry. How many of those people would have talked to him if the article hadn’t come out?

He ignored Dean, Seamus, Neville, and Ron as they speculated about whom Dumbledore had booked for entertainment. He went to his trunk and, instead of grabbing a clean set of robes, he dug around looking for his photo album. He found it near the bottom and pulled it out.

He sat on his bed and pulled the curtains shut; he didn’t want to head down quite yet. He had always looked at this every Halloween before the feast and he didn’t want to change that.

“Hey, Harry, you coming?” Ron asked from the door.

“No, go down without me. Tell Gin that I’ll be down in about half an hour.” Ron left and Harry was once again thankful that Ron understood him so well. Five minutes passed and Harry paged through the pictures. He heard the door open and close and then the curtains pulled aside. Ginny crawled in next to him. She wrapped an arm around his neck and nestled her head in the crook of his arm. Harry didn’t mind her looking this year. It felt... right.

About five minutes later, Harry heard Ron yelling at Hermione. It sounded like they were on the stairs. Soon the door opened and closed again and Hermione pulled back the curtains and took a seat next to Harry. Harry could see Ron in the doorway and motioned that it was all right. Ron came over, glanced once at his sister snuggling into Harry’s chest and sat with Hermione in his arms.

Harry showed them all of the pictures, pointing out Sirius, Remus, and Thia in all of the pictures. He told them the little bits that Thia or Remus had told him about the pictures. An hour and a half later, they headed down to the Great Hall, hoping that not all of the food was eaten. They had missed the actual feast and the tables were gone, replaced by a dance floor and a stage. On the stage were the Weird Sisters, the most popular band in the wizarding world.

Harry and Ron glanced at each other and rolled their eyes. Neither was particularly fond of dancing, having had bad experiences their fourth year. But, Harry thought looking at Ginny, this time might not be so bad.

Ginny taught Harry how to dance that night. She laughed mercilessly when he messed up and praised him when he did well. Harry was having a great time and by the looks of it, so were Ron and Hermione. When the song ended, Harry begged Ginny to let him rest. He was sore from his training session the day before. Thia had gotten fed up with his attitude that week and had worked him hard.

They sat at one of the small tables around the edge of the dance floor and Ron and Hermione made their way over. They talked for a bit,

but then Ginny's favorite song started and Harry took her out to dance. It was a slow dance and Ginny leaned her head on Harry's chest listening to his heartbeat right next to her ear. Harry wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his head against hers, breathing in the sweet fragrance of her hair.

Harry felt his mind drift and soon he was looking at Diagon Alley. How had he ended up here? There was Fudge giving a little speech about the bravery of James and Lily Potter. Harry cracked his knuckles in anger, the pompous fool. He made a signal and thirty Death Eaters started firing curses into the crowd.

Harry felt his scar rip open or at least it hurt enough to have. He screamed as Voldemort started killing and torturing. He watched as innocent people died just because of Fudge's folly. The minutes passed and Voldemort slowly made his way up to the stage where Fudge was hiding behind several Aurors. Harry was shocked to see that one of them was Tonks.

Just as many Death Eaters were ringed around Voldemort. He gave the command and each Death Eater sent a spell at one of the Aurors. They all hit and Harry screamed as a green light passed through Tonks. Voldemort glanced at the Death Eater who had cast it and whispered, "Nice job, Severus."

Harry screamed again as Voldemort looked at the sniveling fool of a Minister with absolute pleasure. "So, what do you think about your celebration now, i Minister /i ? I think this should teach you that taunting living Dark Lords is a bad idea. Any last words, i Minister /i ?"

"J-just d-don't think m-my death is th-the end of the f-fight," he managed to stumble out.

Voldemort laughed and Harry felt his scar explode with pain. "Oh, I never thought it would. I'm sure I'm just making Dumbledore a little angrier and Potter a little pissed off. There's nothing to worry about from them, so I'm not afraid. Your death is just to amuse myself and to teach others the lesson you learnt. Anything else, i Minister /i ?"

"You w-watch out, Vol-Vol-." He swore loudly because he wasn't able to say the name. "Y-you w-watch out, 'cause P-Potter will c-catch up-p to y-you. H-he'll d-destroy you."

Voldemort laughed once again, "Can you not even say a simple name? Say it and I might just spare you, i Minister. /i "

"V-Vol-Volde-V-Voldem-ma-ort."

"Not good enough. i Avada Kedavra!" /i The same green light that had enveloped Tonks hit Fudge and he was dead before he hit the ground feet below his kneeling body.

center /center

"Harry, Harry, wake up." Harry sat up straight and turned away from the voice and puked. He felt something run down his face and touched it with his fingers; it was blood from his scar.

"Are you alright, Harry?" the calm voice of Dumbledore asked from next to where the first voice had come. He looked over and saw Ginny holding his hand. It was she who he had first heard.

He nodded and tried to stand, but Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder to hold him down. "First eat some chocolate. I suppose Tom visited you." Harry nodded and ate the chocolate thankfully. He looked around him and saw that he was still on the dance floor. He felt his cheeks burn red with embarrassment. "What did you see?"

"Voldemort took offence at the celebration in Diagon Alley." Harry rolled his eyes; anyone could have seen that coming. "Thirty Death Eaters were set loose on the crowd. Death Eaters killed the Aurors around Fudge; Tonks was one of them. Voldemort killed Fudge himself. He said it was just something to amuse himself with."

"Fudge is dead?" Dumbledore asked quietly. Harry nodded. He stood and looked at the students. "I think tonight's excitement is over for the night. You should all return to your common rooms and head to bed. You have forty minutes. After that time you will be punished as if you broke curfew. Goodnight." He turned back to Ron, Hermione, Ginny,

and Harry, who was now leaning on the two Weasleys. "Come with me to my office."

In Dumbledore's office Harry told them what happened in greater detail. He left out the little part about who had killed Tonks though. He didn't know why, but he wanted to hear Snape's side of the story first.

"I can't believe she's dead," Ginny said shocked. Harry nodded and hugged Ginny closer.

"Remus was excited about next week's Saturday session. She was going to come and Thia and her were going to duel," Harry said sadly. Tonight was the full moon and Remus wouldn't know about her death for a day or two.

"That would have been fun to watch," Hermione added softly. Her face was streaked with tears. "You would have learned a lot from it."

"Always about learning, isn't 'Mione?" Ron teased quietly, trying to get everyone to smile, but failing miserably.

Harry was thinking about Fudge's last words. Did he know about the Prophecy? How could he?

"What's the matter, Harry," Ginny asked concerned. "And don't say nothing. I felt your body tense up."

He sighed, but answered truthfully, "I was thinking about Fudge's last words. He said that I would catch up to Voldemort and destroy him." Dumbledore looked up quickly in surprise. "Professor, did he know about the Prophecy?" Harry cursed himself as soon as he said it. He had let the cat out of the bag now.

"No, he didn't," Dumbledore answered slightly confused. "I need to figure out how this affects everything, why don't you four head to bed. Minerva, please escort them to the common room."

The common room was filled with students; it seemed that no one had gone to bed. McGonagall sent them off and stayed to make sure

no one snuck back down. Thankfully, her presence kept Hermione's questions at bay and Harry made it safely to the dorm room.

There Dean, Seamus, and Neville were waiting for Harry. He crossed to his trunk, ignoring their questions, and took out his fake galleon. He set the date and time for the next morning at 10 AM. That was when he was supposed to be training with Thia, so she would be able to supervise.

"Wait until tomorrow. I want to sleep." But true sleep never came for Harry. He spent the whole night dreaming as the Death Eaters cut down the innocent bystanders, as Snape's spell hit and killed Tonks, and as Voldemort played with his prey. Nightmares from the past surfaced too; Cedric falling dead, Voldemort rising from the cauldron alive, the duel in the graveyard, Sirius falling through the Veil, Trelawney giving the Prophecy, Sephra's parents' deaths, the Revelries he'd seen, the Burrow, and the Joneses. It was a wonder that Harry didn't wake the others up.

center /center

"Harry, what are you doing up already?" Ginny scolded Harry when she entered the common room from the girl's dorm.

"Couldn't sleep. What are you doing up so early?" It wasn't that early, at least not in Harry's mind; it was 7:30.

"Thought you'd be up and wanted to keep you company." She motioned for him to scoot over in the chair he was sitting in and she sat in the small space provided. She leaned her head and listened to his heartbeat, which had quickened.

"Thanks, Gin, I 'preciate it." He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and laid his head on hers. "So what happened after I passed out?"

"Well, I set you down, yelling for Professor Dumbledore. Your scar started to bleed and Dumbledore was worried. We couldn't wake you up from it." She pulled one of his hands into her lap and stroked it. "Everyone was screaming, or at least it seemed that way to me. The

Professors had to keep the students back so that they wouldn't trample you." She kissed the back of his hand. "The students and staff were worried about you, Harry. They thought you were dead or hurt in some way."

"I was." He looked up, past her and into the fire.

"Oh, Harry. Are you alright? And don't lie to me!" she admonished him. Harry looked down at his girlfriend (He liked the sound of that!) and smiled ruefully.

"Not really, but I will be. I have one idea of how to help," he said giving her a sly smile.

"And what's that?" she asked playfully back. Harry leaned his mouth down and kissed her gently, but passionately. They broke apart for a breath and Harry smiled at her. She was a bright spot in his life, one of the few.

"What are you thinking about right now?" Ginny asked curiously. Harry knew she wouldn't give up asking, so he tried to come up with a way to distract her.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because you looked so happy and peaceful. It was like nothing had happened, ever." Harry looked at her stunned. Could she see right through him?

"I was thinking," Harry said, telling her the truth, "about how much you and Ron and Hermione mean to me. That you're one of the few bright spots in a very dark world."

"Harry, what aren't you telling us?" He kissed her to keep her quiet. It worked and they enjoyed another passionate kiss. Several catcalls and loud whistles came from the stairs to the boy's dorm and Ginny jumped off of Harry's lap.

"Nice, Harry," Seamus said congratulating him. Dean was smiling, but Harry could tell he was a little jealous. Neville was smiling also, but

whole-heartedly. And Ron... Well, he was torn between the joy that his sister and best friend were happy and the anger that his best friend was making out with his little sister.

"Thanks," Harry said embarrassed. He gave Ginny's hand a quick squeeze and she went back up to her dorm to finish getting ready for the day. Harry was surprised to see that it was already 8:30. He tapped his fake galleon again, resetting the time to 9:30. He didn't think he could put up with the questions for very long.

"So, what are you going to tell us, Harry?" Dean asked as the five boys headed to breakfast.

"Nothing, until the meeting. Telling you guys once will be enough for me." Seamus and Dean tried to get Harry to talk, but he wouldn't. Harry was thankful for Neville's and Ron's silence. It gave him a deeper appreciation for his friends.

At breakfast, it seemed that people were either giving Harry looks of distrust, worry, fear, or curiosity. The D.A. members asked him why he had arranged a new meeting and then changed the time. Others asked him if he was all right. Still others asked him about what had happened the night before. And when Hermione arrived, Harry felt the unasked question about the Prophecy. He decided to get a quick breather and went to ask Thia if she minded supervising the meeting instead of training. She was more than willing to help and understood why Harry wanted to have the meeting. Harry also noticed that Snape was tired and drawn looking; both emotions that Harry wasn't used to seeing from the man.

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny left with Harry to go to the Room of Requirement and sat waiting for 9:30 to come. There were still fifteen minutes and Harry knew what would come out of Hermione's mouth first.

"What is that Prophecy, Harry?" she asked as soon as the door was closed. Harry looked away from her and ignored her. Now that he had the perfect opportunity to tell them, he didn't want to. i Why am I so fickle? /i Harry asked himself angrily. He had been more than ready to tell them the week before.

"Harry, please tell us what you're keeping from us," Ginny begged him. That surprised Harry; she didn't beg often. He shook his head no. He couldn't tell them right before the meeting. They would need time for it to sink in and there were only ten minutes left before the meeting started. People would be showing up any moment now.

"Is it the Prophecy from the Department of Mysteries?" Ron asked. Hermione looked at him startled. Obviously she had connected the two. Harry just stared into the fire and the door mercifully opened. Most of the club entered in that first wave. Everyone else was there within three minutes.

"I thought it would be easier if I just explained last night to all of you at once." Harry looked at them tiredly. He hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep. And when his eyes were actually closed last night, his nightmares kept it from being restful sleep. "I would like you to keep this among yourselves; I don't want the wrong ears to hear it."

"So kick the Slytherins out." Harry glared at the fifth year Gryffindor that spoke.

"I'm not worried just about Slytherins, I'm worried about the spies in the other houses. At least with the Slytherin house, we all know whom not to trust. But with the others we have to be careful. Just don't talk about this where you could be over heard." Harry ran his fingers through his hair, thinking. "I would prefer that you only talk about it with other members of the club. If you have friends not in it, please don't tell them. But I won't force you." He stopped and looked at them carefully.

"As my dorm mates can tell you, I have a problem with nightmares." He stopped and suppressed a shudder as he thought about last night's show. "Most of them are normal nightmares caused by everything I've seen in my life. But others..."

He paused trying to figure out how to say the next part. He had to be careful with it; he couldn't give away too much. His right hand went up to his scar unconsciously as he continued. "My scar isn't normal, because it wasn't caused by a spell that I should have survived. It

created a bond between Voldemort and me. You all know that I can speak Parseltongue?" Everyone nodded. "That's why. Voldemort passed on that talent to me the night his curse failed." Harry paused once again thinking hard about the next part.

"Another connection between us is that in my sleep when both of our guards are down, I can see into his mind."

"You can read Voldemort's mind?" Cho asked alarmed. Ginny glared at her and Cho looked embarrassed for interrupting him.

"No, I can't read it and thankfully he can't read mine." He shook his head and tried to explain it. "It's like I can see through his eyes. I experience visions from his point of view. I can, oh I don't know how to say it." He ran his fingers through his hair and grimaced. "I can 'hear' some of his more basic thoughts and can feel his emotions. Though most of the time what he feels about something and what I feel about it are complete opposites."

"So what happened last night?" Seamus asked worried. "For that matter what happened the first Friday here, after the D.A. meeting?"

"Last night, was that stupid celebration." Everyone rolled their eyes or shook their heads in amazement at the stupidity of the act. "Well, it pissed Voldemort off." Harry went on to tell them some of the details from that night. Some glanced at Harry with pity, others fear.

"As for that Friday. Well, I saw the Burrow attacked."

"What's the Burrow?" Sephra asked confused.

"The Weasley's home. Voldemort also had the Death Eaters attack the muggle village nearby." There were some mumbles of surprise. No one had heard about it. The paper had only briefly brought up the attack. Harry couldn't understand why. The Weasleys had outsmarted Voldemort, wouldn't the Prophet want everyone to know that?

They talked about several things after that concerning the war and what they planned to do once they left Hogwarts. Harry was surprised

at the number who wanted to become Aurors. Many of the others wanted to become Healers or support the war effort in other ways.

The clock struck 11:30 and Thia asked Harry if he still wanted to train today. He nodded yes. Everyone started to leave and Harry asked his friends what they planned to do today. They decided to go work by the lake, for the weather had completely cleared up over yesterday afternoon and last night. Harry said goodbye and followed Thia to the classroom.

He looked at the Wall and realized he'd have to put up a picture of Tonks now. Some times life wasn't fair. She died for a Minister she didn't even like. How cruel the twists of fate could be.

"So, why'd you tell them?" Thia asked as the door closed shut.

"Because they needed to know so that they could make up their own minds about me. I'm not going to pretend I'm not who I am. It's information Voldemort knows about already, to an extent and I'm willing to risk him finding out more."

She trained him hard that day. Harry enjoyed the work out and learnt a lot from her. The empty desk where Remus normally sat during the weekend practice was empty. He wouldn't have recovered completely from the werewolf change and would be sleeping at the moment. His empty spot though reminded Harry of Tonks. How would Remus take another loss? Remus had lost his best friends, was betrayed by another, and he spent years believing his younger sister was dead. Now his girlfriend was dead. It was so easy for Voldemort to rip apart lives and families.

"Do you think I have a chance?" Harry asked her when their most recent duel had subsided.

"Yes, I do." She looked at him. "You have a huge potential, Harry. Not only that, but you have Voldemort worried. You have silent followers; this school is filled with them. They all are willing to die fighting for what they believe in: you and your goals. You are only 16 and you hold something Voldemort never will, followers who follow not in fear

or revenge but in loyalty and love. Sure you have a few of the former, but the majority is the latter.”

“I never asked for them to follow me,” Harry mumbled.

“Of course not, Harry. And it makes them love you more.” She smiled at the embarrassed boy. “They trust that you won’t turn out bad. Your morals are too strongly against that. And they know that you will fight, for them, now that you told them. Harry, you won their respect.” She stopped and considered something. Harry had never thought about this before. He had a following. It was an odd thought.

“At our staff meeting before the feast, we talked about Blaise Zabini’s pledge to you. It was the first time that any of the staff, including Professor Binns, had seen Slytherins pledge their loyalties to a Gryffindor while they were still at school. It just doesn’t happen. Harry, your influence is greater than you think.” There was a knock on the door and Professor McGonagall entered.

“I need to speak with you, Thia.” She looked at Harry, “All right there, Potter?” Harry nodded. “Well, then, if you could give us some privacy. And don’t listen at the door; I’m putting silencing charms on it.”

Harry first headed to the kitchens for lunch, which the house elves were more than willing to supply him.

“Mr. Harry Potter, sir, did you enjoy the meal Dobby made for you? For your date with Miss Wheezy?” Dobby asked standing right next to him and pulling on Harry’s pant leg to get his attention.

“Yes, Dobby, Ginny and I enjoyed the picnic meal. Thanks for making it and delivering it.” Harry looked at the house elf with respect. Here was a fearless creature.

“Don’t mention it, Mr. Harry Potter, sir. Dobby is more than willing to serve you. Thank you, Mr. Harry, sir.” Dobby looked as if he wanted to say something else.

“Yes, Dobby?” Harry asked curiously.

“Well, sir, the house elves and Dobby have noticed Harry Potter sitting at the fire late into the night or early in the morning. Dobby was wondering if Mr. Harry Potter was all right?” Harry looked at the little elf surprised.

“Yes, Dobby. They’re just bad dreams that need thinking through. I’m not getting in your way am I?”

“Oh, no, sir. Not in our way, Mr. Harry Potter.” Dobby looked frantic.

“You guys can work around me, I won’t mind. And if you’re in the Tower and I’m up, just say a quick hello. It’d be nice to talk to someone.” Dobby was overcome with emotion and started to cry into Harry’s robes. Harry was slightly alarmed, but let the elf cry trying to calm him.

“Thank you, Mr. Harry Potter, sir. Dobby is honored by your kindness.”

“Yeah, well” Harry said embarrassed. “I need to go find my friends. Thanks for the lunch.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Harry Potter, sir,” Dobby called after him, his voice filled with reverence.

“Why won’t you tell us?” Hermione asked hurt. He’d only been with his friends for ten minutes, but in that short time they had asked him to talk to them about the Prophecy about a million times. Harry was surprised at some of the ways they brought it up.

“Cause I don’t want to, Hermione. Let’s just finish this essay for Thia.”

“Harry, please tell us. I can see it eating you up inside,” Ginny whispered quietly. For the second time that day Harry wondered at Ginny’s ability to read him.

“No, I don’t feel like talking right now,” Harry replied stubbornly.

“You never feel like talking, Harry,” Ron said angrily. “We wait and we wait, and you never tell us. I’m sick of waiting, Harry. Spill the beans.” Harry looked at Ron surprised. It was usually Ron who told the girls to leave him be. It was a shock to have Ron snap at him about this.

“Fine, follow me.”

Chapter Sixteen: The Telling of the Prophecy

Now I will tell you what I've done for you,
50 thousand tears I've cried for you.
Screaming, deceiving, and bleeding for you;
And still you won't hear me
Evanesence: Going Under.

Harry led them through the castle, past all of the talking, laughing students. At some point Ginny had slipped her hand into his and he held onto it with all his being. Harry stopped at the entrance to the corridor that held the Room of Requirement. "Wait here." He paced in front of the wall thinking about his cliff. The door appeared after his third trip past and the others followed him into the room.

"Wow," Hermione breathed taking a look at the views. Ron stood in awe of the wonders of Nature. Ginny looked at the weather and her concern for Harry multiplied tenfold. It was exactly as it had been at their date, except the weather was cloudy and grey. All around them there was rain. Directly above them, it was not raining, so they didn't get wet. A strong wind blew in from the sea. It whipped at their robes and threatened to blow them over the other side.

"Sit," Harry said motioning to the stumps near him. He had walked over to the edge of the cliff and was now looking at the ocean. He drank in the view of the choppy seas and stormy clouds. He ran his fingers through his hair and tried to think about what to say. "Don't interrupt me, once I start. It'll be easier that way."

They sat in silence waiting for Harry to start. He took a deep breath and started quietly, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have the power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

He stopped and took a deep shuddering breath. He could feel their stunned looks. "Trelawney gave that prophecy the winter before I was born. My parents defied Voldemort three times. I was born on the last day of July. Voldemort marked me as his equal when he came after me and gave me this," he said pointing to his scar even though they couldn't see it. "The only thing now, is for me to figure out what that power is, because it's the key to winning the war." There was a pause as they took everything in. Hermione was the first to break the silence.

"And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. Harry, does that mean..." Harry nodded. He looked straight down at the waves crashing against the rocks hundreds of feet down. "Don't you dare jump!" she yelled frantically.

"Jump?" he said without turning. He didn't think he could face them without scaring them. "Hermione, I'd never jump. If I throw away my life, Voldemort wins. Anyways, there's a safety net." There was a long pause. No one could think of anything to say.

"Oh, Harry, why didn't you tell us?" Ginny finally asked.

"Because, I hadn't really even thought about it until after the Burrow was attacked. Something your dad said and something Dumbledore said at breakfast the next day and something Katie said after try outs seemed to make me think about it and want to do something to even out the odds. That's why I'm training with Thia."

"She knew!" Ginny shouted angrily. She regretted it the second she saw Harry's shoulders drop in pain. "I'm sorry."

"No," Harry started, running a hand through his hair. "I should have told you guys a long time ago. She knew because my mum told her it. Sirius and Remus knew because my dad told them. I'm sorry, but if I couldn't even think about it, how could I talk about it." He shook his head and looked at the gray sky that melted right into the gray ocean. "All summer I avoided thinking about it. At the Burrow it was easy, there were so many distractions. But at the Dursleys' I couldn't think of anything other than Sirius's death, the Prophecy, and not hearing from you guys."

"That's why Dumbledore apologized," Ron added thoughtfully.

"Yes, because he realized his mistake too late." Harry stopped. "He's protected me for so long and it seemed best to protect me, no, shelter me a little longer. He kept my future from me. He knew his mistake and was sorry for it."

"This is what Dumbledore told you about after the Ministry fiasco?" Ginny asked contemplatively. Harry nodded. She added after a moment's pause, "How could you have not gone to the Ministry to save Sirius? You'd have still gone, wouldn't you?"

"Yes and no. I would have practiced Occulmency more because I'd have had a reason to. Instead of being forced into it, I would have understood the seriousness of the situation." Harry stopped and brushed his hair from his eyes. "I might have been able to see the falseness of the vision and then I wouldn't have gone. Or, if I had still thought it real, I might not have grabbed the Prophecy to begin with. I don't know, I haven't thought about that for a long while now. I forgave Dumbledore and that was that."

"Bloody hell, mate, you got it tough," Ron said, trying to laugh. He shrugged at his lame attempt. "Well, it couldn't have happened to a more deserving lad." Harry glared at him. "Wait, listen to my reasoning first. You'd have had a great life without Voldemort there to ruin it. The greatest best friend, the best tutor, and most wonderful girlfriend, besides my own," he added quickly looking at Hermione, "and the greatest family and family friends. That's just too lucky, mate. With this, well, it's an equalizer. Though a tough one, I must admit." Harry laughed at him.

"That's true," Harry said. There was a long pause. "Neville was born that same month," he stated calmly.

"I read that Alice and Frank Longbottom also survived Voldemort three times," Hermione said thoughtfully. "So it might not be you, it could be Neville instead."

"No, not any more," Harry answered wearily, rubbing a finger along the length of his scar. "Don't forget the scar."

"Oh," Hermione said softly. "Well, that's for the best." Harry tilted his head to the side; he couldn't bring himself to turn around yet and look at them. "You're the stronger wizard, with or without the power Voldemort gave you."

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said so quietly, that if the wind wasn't blowing towards them, she wouldn't have heard it. He ran his fingers through his hair one more time and asked, turning around, "What do you guys think?"

"It explains a lot," Hermione stated simply.

"You'll win, mate," Ron said with conviction.

"We aren't leaving you, Harry," Ginny said looking into his eyes. They had looked so lost just seconds before they spoke, but now, deep within them, a beacon of hope shone out.

He wished for another stump and sat looking at them. He felt so relieved now that he had told them. It took a weight off his shoulders.

"So, you want to go play Quidditch?" Ron asked after a long silence.

"Sure," Harry said standing up. He headed for the door, when Ginny called his name quietly. He stopped and turned to face her. Tears were running down her face. He took three quick steps and hugged her, swaying side to side to comfort her. "It's alright, Gin."

"Oh, Harry, it's not alright." She buried her face in his robes and let her body tremble from the sobs. When she had calmed down, she lifted her face to look up at him. "I should be the one comforting you, Harry. You're the one with this damn Prophecy hanging over your head. But it's just like you to help others and not worry about yourself." She shook her head. "I'll always be here for you, Harry. No matter what, I'll be here." She hugged him tightly. Ron placed his hand on Harry's shoulder and nodded in agreement. Hermione hugged both Harry and Ginny.

Harry had never felt luckier or happier.

The Dark Lord Strikes Again By Vachel Mente

The Dark Lord seems to have taken offence at the late Minister Cornelius Fudge's celebration. He and about thirty Death Eaters appeared at the celebrations and decimated those in the crowds. This reporter did not want to be mistaken as a supporter of the late Minister and had watched the whole thing unfold from the window of a friend's apartment above a shop.

The Minister was speaking when curses, hexes, and jinxes started flying from the wands of dark wizards and witches. The Dark Lord himself took part in the torturing and killing. He made his way, with about ten of his closest followers, towards the late Minister.

By the time the Dark Lord arrived to stand before the stage the late Minister Fudge had been speaking from, ten Aurors ringed the late Minister. These brave souls all died protecting him, except for one, who is in critical care at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

The late Minister and the Dark Lord exchanged a few words, but in the end, the Dark Lord fired the most unforgivable of curses. The Minister died, on his knees though whatever he had said angered the Dark Lord.

One hundred thirty-one innocent souls died that day. Twenty-three Aurors died in service, including the nine guarding the Minister. Eleven Death Eaters died and seven were captured. Less than half made it out safely. Our losses are great, but we must move on and continue.

As for that one brave Auror, she was not even on duty. Nymphadora Tonks was in the crowd watching the proceedings when the Death Eaters attacked. When one of the Aurors surrounding the late Minister fell, she took his spot. Though not the only one to survive

the day with grievous injuries, she sure was one of the bravest. I tip my hat to her and drink to her speedy recovery.

Let us pick up the pieces and forge on. The Dark Lord may have beaten us at this one battle, but the war is far from over. The only way he will win is if we give up. Let us continue fighting. Let us never give up. The Department Heads must pick a new Minister and it must be soon. They must be sure not to put a Death Eater spy in as Minister. They must pick someone strong.

The obvious choice is Professor Albus Dumbledore, headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I say nay to him. Not because he is a bad choice, for he may be the best choice out there. But instead, because I believe the lives of the students at Hogwarts are our dearest treasure and need the greatest protection. They are our future. They will continue the fight after we are gone. It is their training now that will affect their futures. We need someone we can trust to protect them at that school. Not only this, but Professor Dumbledore has already turned down the job several times and it is pointless to waste time asking him once again.

Let us find a new man. He must be a strong fighter and a willing leader. Let us find the next person to lead us in this war, who will not make the same mistakes as those in the past. Let us move on.

Harry's eyes kept reading the paragraph about Tonks over and over again. She wasn't dead! But how could that be? He had watched the green light hit her. He had watched as her body hit the ground. How was this possible?

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were just as surprised. It was now the Monday after that memorable weekend. This was the first article concerning the events of Halloween and Harry was surprised by the

tone. It was along the same vein of the one written on Friday. The same guy wrote it, that's for sure.

"He sure likes Dumbledore and us," Ron finally said. Ginny rolled her eyes at him and Harry let out a short laugh.

"I wonder who will replace him? What man would be stupid enough to take the job?" Harry asked perplexed. He wouldn't want the job in a time of peace, but during war. You'd be able to get your fighting accomplished, but not much else. And the danger level was so high.

"I don't know," Hermione answered thoughtfully, "but it needs to be soon. They've already gone two days without a Minister and the longer it is, the more likely the chance of Voldemort sinking his teeth into the Ministry."

The bell rang and the trio headed down to Potions. They took their normal seats at the back and collected the ingredients they needed for that day's lesson. The bell for the start of class rang, but Professor Snape was nowhere to be seen.

Harry looked around the dungeon and noticed a slight change to the seating arrangement. D.A. members were now sitting together regardless of what houses they were in. They might still be partnered with someone from the same house, but the other partners near them might be Slytherins or Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws. Next to Harry, Ron, and Hermione (there was one set of three because the class had an odd number) were Sephra and Blaise. On the other side were Zachariah Smith and Justin Flinch-Fletchley. It was a pleasant surprise, but Harry realized that this change had been occurring over the past few weeks; he had not noticed it until now.

"Why have you not started working?" the cross voice of Professor Snape rang out over the room. "I came in expecting you all to be smart children and working hard at the work you must do for the day. But, no, I find you chatting away. That is unacceptable." He glared at the students. Harry was surprised at the man's appearance. He wasn't holding up too well.

"The directions are already on the board, begin!" He stalked over to his desk and started to read the book placed on it. Harry rolled his eyes at the down turned head and started to chop up the centipedes for the antidote they were brewing.

"Wonder what's up with him?" Ron asked quietly as he dumped some unicorn's blood in the bubbling antidote.

"He's been like that all weekend," Blaise whispered back. "He's been extremely cross and even snapped at Draco last night. I've never seen him like this."

Harry carefully chopped his centipedes. He thought he knew the reason, but he couldn't say anything. Voldemort had thought Tonks died and had congratulated Snape. If Tonks had lived, Voldemort would suspect Snape even more. As much as Harry hated the slimy git, he did feel sorry for him.

"He yelled at Draco," Hermione repeated surprised. "I've never seen that."

"Neither have I," Blaise answered. "Draco wanted the Quidditch pitch, but Gryffindor had it booked. Snape snapped at him, saying that you couldn't always get what you wanted and had to learn to live with what you do have."

"You could tell Snape was sorry for yelling at him. He didn't apologize, but you could tell he regretted it," Sephra remarked. "I wonder why?"

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Zabini, Miss Granger, and Miss Carrigan, could you please tell me what you all find so important that you need to discuss it during class?" They looked down at their work, angry or embarrassed. "I'll take that as a no. That's 20 points from Gryffindor and 10 points from Slytherin." Harry gaped at Snape. That was the first time he had ever heard Snape take points from his own house.

"That's not fair," Ron sputtered angrily. "Why'd you take twenty points from us and only ten from Slytherin?"

“Because, Mr. Weasley,” Snape said slowly and maliciously, “there are more Gryffindors involved. That will be another five for your lip.”

Ron opened his mouth to say something else, but Harry stepped on his foot. Snape gave them one last nasty look and strode back to his desk. Harry glared at Ron for making it worse and then went back to his work. Harry wondered what had gotten into Snape; he had taken points from his own house. Was it because they had pledged themselves to Harry?

The day went better after that and the sixth years were excited for their Defense class that afternoon. Thia had told them Friday that they would start dueling today. Though the D.A. members had been practicing for about two weeks, they were excited to learn from Thia and start the dueling competition she had alluded to.

“Welcome, please hurry up and sit,” Thia said, ushering them in at the door. “I want to start as soon as possible.” She waited patiently for them to go to their normal seats. She was now up at the front of the room leaning on the front of her desk. “Harry,” she said just to him, “Do you mind if I single you out for some questions? You should know the answers.” Harry nodded and sat wondering what she planned to ask.

“Alright, everybody situated?” There were several ‘yeahs’ and many nods. “Good. Dueling isn’t for fun, dueling isn’t a hobby, dueling isn’t for the faint of heart, and dueling isn’t for the slow. Dueling, in real life, is life or death. You don’t get a second chance after you’re hit with the killing curse. You must be ready to die and yet want to live desperately.”

She looked at them all, still leaning against her desk. “Harry, what’s the number one rule I have for teaching dueling?”

Harry rolled his eyes and answered by rote, “Never duel to show off and only duel in life threatening situations.”

“Good, why?”

“Because, these techniques are for fighting for your life, not to make yourself look macho or smart.” Harry smiled, “And because you’ll beat me up if I don’t follow them. But then again, you beat me up every training session, so I don’t know why I’m so worried about that.” Thia laughed and the class looked slightly worried. Though they all knew Harry took extra lessons from her, they didn’t know what they did or how she taught dueling.

“Very good, Harry. What’s it like to face Voldemort?” Harry sat stunned. The class had become silent. Not many had heard Harry talk about this much and wanted to hear everything he said.

He shook his head bring himself from the memories of Voldemort. “It’s terrifying,” Harry answered softly, but everyone heard him and his words sent shivers through them all. “Every second you’re positive you won’t live for another one and then when you do you can’t believe that you did. He mocks you. He plays with you, he likes to watch your fear.” He stopped trembling ever so slightly. “He feels no pity, he has no mercy. Once he decides that you’re going to die, well, he’ll hunt you down until your dead. Trust me, I’ve been on his ‘to do’ list for fifteen years.” Several people exchanged glances; they had never heard Harry speak so frankly or so wearily about his life.

“You don’t stand a chance against him. I’ve told the D.A. over and over again: I shouldn’t be here. I have no idea how I lived to be two, let alone sixteen. You can’t beat Voldemort, no one can. Only the hugest gifts of luck at the right time allowed me to survive meeting him. I don’t think anyone else will be so lucky and I don’t know if I’ll be so lucky the next time I face him.” It surprised several people at how sure he sounded about facing Voldemort again.

“But,” Harry said contemptuously at Draco, “you can fight the Death Eaters. They’re all goons and idiots. Their main concern is to please Voldemort. They won’t kill unless he says to. Of course, there’s loads of things they can do to you, but if you train hard and learn how to fight, they won’t get a chance to use their favorites.”

“Thank you.” She turned to the rest of the class. “I won’t teach you how to fight if you’re going to fight amongst each other. I won’t teach you if you’re going to start showing off to the lower years. I’m

teaching you how to fight so that if one day some Death Eaters pay you a visit you'll be ready for them. I can't promise that you'll survive, but you'll give them a fight and that's what's important. Harry, would you help me with a demonstration?" Harry nodded and rose from his chair.

"Go easy, please," he said so that only she could hear. She replied in the same way.

"I would if it was good for you, Harry." She raised her voice so that the rest of the class could hear her. "The first thing you do is bow. Never take your eyes off of your opponent. Watch Harry bow to me." She motioned for Harry to bow and he did. "See how it appears that his bow is deep, but it's not. It's just an illusion of body posture. His head appears to be down, but it's not. See how the forehead is at an 45 degree angle to the floor, giving him full view of me." Harry came out of the bow and waited for her directions.

"In a formal duel, you will then take five steps from the center, away from your opponent. In real life, neither the bow nor the steps happen as they should. Dark wizards are not known for following the rules. You need to be ready for an attack at any moment. We'll take the steps." Harry and Thia took five steps each away from the other. Thia turned quicker and got the first spell out, "Stupefy!"

Harry was expecting both the faster turn and the stunning spell. He said, "Protego!" and a shield protected him from the spell. He shot out a befuddlement charm, but Thia anticipated it and side stepped it.

"Avelgule!" Harry fell to the ground. He didn't want to be hit by that blindness spell again, once had been enough for him. She had expected that and sent a second spell at him. "Engorgio!"

Harry grimaced as the spell hit his left arm. It started to swell and several of the girls screamed. He put up a strong shield and thought quickly for the counter-charm. He thought that the regular spell would work and whispered, "Finite incantatem." He sighed with relief as his arm returned to normal. He stood quickly and shouted, "Avelgule!" hoping to catch her off guard. She was ready for it and blocked it easily with a shield.

“Quine Flechum!” Five arrows shot out at Harry and he was hard pressed to stop them. He dodged to his left to miss one, levitated a student’s book to stop one heading for his heart, and dropped to the ground to miss the last one coming his way.

From the ground he fired, “Incendio!” She was ready for it, as she always was and let it hit her robes. She put it out quickly before any real damage occurred. He stood up and fired a stunner at her. Thia had to drop to the ground to miss it and fired a severing charm at him.

Harry ducked this one, falling to his right. Until very recently he had been unaware that this weak spell could actually cut through the upper layers of skin. He didn’t duck soon enough and he felt ii brush his cheek. The pain was sharp, but he could ignore it.

“Impedimenta!” He hoped it would hit and slow her down. But to be careful he sent another one lower to her right so that if she would move that way it would hit her instead.

As normal, Harry was surprised at her speed. She dodged the first spell to her right, as he had hoped. But she then dodged to the left after the first one passed her and wasn’t hit by the second one.

“Can’t you let just one of my spells hit you?” Harry yelled at her angrily. She just smiled and laughed, just what Harry had hoped. “Stupefy!” Her eyes were closed for only a few seconds as she laughed, but that was enough. The stunner hit her chest and she fell. Harry got up, putting his sleeve up to his cheek to stop the bleeding. “Ennverate!”

She shook her head groggily and then looked at Harry with a huge smile on her face. “Good job, Harry. You knew I was going to close my eyes?”

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Harry felt like he had cheated, but he knew he hadn’t.

“Harry, you beat me fair and square. I shouldn’t have closed my eyes, or laughed for that matter.” She turned to the class and raised her

voice, even though they all had heard that exchange. "So, what do you think?"

"That was fast," Dean said deeply impressed. "Harry's not nearly so fast in D.A. meetings."

"Nah, he turns it down so that he's only a level or two above you guys." She looked at him and saw the blood. "Oh, so that did hit. Let me heal it." She healed it and removed the blood from his shirt. "As I was saying, he turns it down so that you learn something, but don't become discouraged. I do the same for him, though he's improved a lot since the start of the year. This really is your thing, Harry. Anything else?"

"Didn't you win when you hit his cheek?" Hermione asked. The rules by which the D.A. fought said that the first person to draw blood won.

"By some rules yes," she said, grimacing at her forgetfulness. "I should have specified the rules for you, but Harry and I know them so well that I didn't think about that. We stopped following that rule weeks ago. I'm teaching him to fight real fights, so blood is to be expected. His abilities and talent has him past the seventh years so I thought I'd use the training rules for Aurors with him." She laughed at Harry's red face. "Boy, do you blush like your dad. Lily didn't blush, but James sure did and easily too."

"That arrow spell was cool," Seamus said excitedly. "What was the incantation?"

"Flechum," Harry answered before she could. "And don't get hit by one of those things, they hurt like hell."

"And you have a mouth like your Godfather's," she said sadly. "But, yes they hurt a lot."

"You've been hit with one of them?" Sephra asked.

"Yeah, I have a nice little scar right here because of it," Harry said pointing to the back of his upper arm. "Thia laughed for minutes when it hit."

"You did look rather funny trying to get it out," she said smiling.
"Anything else?"

"You guys fell all the time," Draco sneered.

"Yes," Thia answered calmly. Harry wanted to punch his face in.
"Sometimes falling is the best course of action. If you can cast a spell accurately it's even more advantageous to fall. Your opponent doesn't expect that and he doesn't expect the spell."

"Can I have my book back?" Justin asked after a pause.

"Oh, sorry about that," Harry said grabbing the book from the ground. He broke off the fletching, opened the book to the page where the arrowhead met the shaft and pulled the arrow out. "Thia, how do I fix this?"

"You don't. You can't fix damage like that to a book, not without doing it page by page." She walked over to the bookshelves and pulled out a book. "Here, on the house." Harry handed him his old book also.

"What was that spell that started with A?" Blaise asked curiously. Several others nodded as well.

"Avelgule," Thia answered, showing them the wand movement. "It causes several minutes of true blindness. The more power behind it the longer the blindness lasts. I think it was once casted and had a permanent effect." She waved her wand and a book floated to her from the shelf. She paged through it and found what she was looking for. "Yes, it was. Though the wizard who was blinded only lived for three days after that, before he was killed in battle with a dark wizard. So, it could have been permanent or he just died before it wore off."

The bell rang and everyone filed out talking excitedly. Several people shot Harry awe filled glances and Harry ignored them. "Thia, are you watching the D.A. this week or Professor McGonagall?"

"I am, why?" Harry looked at her innocently.

“Oh, for no reason. I was just wondering. How’s Tonks?”

Thia sighed, “She’s alive. They’re still not sure what hit her, so she’s alive, but in some kind of coma.”

“Does Remus know?” Harry was sure he did, but he wanted to ask before his next question.

“Yes, I told him late Saturday night.” She shook her head in sorrow. “He’d just woken up from the nap he had taken and I don’t think he believed me to start with. I would do stuff like that when we were kids. Tease him about what had happened when he was out of it. But, he realized I was telling the truth and hasn’t spent much time away from her side.”

“Is he coming this weekend?” Harry sure hoped he was.

“Yes, and he’s hoping to bring Tonks along to watch.” This time she shook her head at his folly. “She’ll probably still be at St. Mungo’s even if she would wake up today, just in case. When’s the meeting this week?”

“I’m not sure. It all depends on Quidditch practices. Would you mind if we only meet once next week? I’m sure that Katie will want to practice more than twice next week.”

“No problem, Harry. And if you need a day this week, just say so.” She smiled at him as they passed the Wall. “Sometimes play is just as important as work. More often it is.”

“Ah, Severus. I am glad you could join us this evening.” Harry was looking down at the prostrated form of his Potions professor. “I have been meaning to talk with you alone. I wish you to stay after.”

The form said a quiet, “As you wish, my lord.”

Harry watched in horror as the Death Eaters made sport of a young muggle girl and talked about that past week’s tortures. Voldemort spoke quietly to Rookwood.

"How is the research coming?" Voldemort asked the terrified man.

"It's not as productive as I'd like, Master," he answered softly.

"Rookwood, why did I break just you out of Azkaban?" Voldemort asked.

"Because I can be of use to you, my Lord," Rookwood replied bowing low. "My Lord, we cannot find anything more reliable than the legends we already have. I can't even tell what the object is exactly from those legends. Whatever it is, the Carrigan's took the knowledge about it to the grave with them."

"Is that so?" Voldemort said in a dangerous voice. Rookwood nodded, before he caught himself. "Crucio!" The other Death Eaters stopped their games and turned to watch one of their number being punished. "I want to know what it is! I want to know what it does! And I'll punish you if you don't find out soon!" Voldemort removed the curse. "Do not keep me waiting Rookwood." He dismissed them all, but Snape stayed behind as he was asked. Snape waited off in the shadows, until Voldemort motioned for the man to come closer.

"My Lord wished to speak with me?"

"I've been worried for you, Severus. I have this sinking suspicion that you are growing soft like that mudblood loving fool Dumbledore." Harry saw Snape's bowed form shake. Either Snape was terrified or a really good actor. "Look me in the eyes, Severus." Voldemort spent several minutes examining Snape's mind and Harry was impressed with Snape's control of his mind. "I'm still worried, Severus. Perhaps a reminder is in order?"

"No, my Lord. I serve only you." Snape's voice came out in a whine.

"On the contrary, Severus. Crucio!" Voldemort watched in amusement as Snape twitched and writhed in agony. Harry was disgusted by Voldemort's sense of humor. Sure, Harry didn't like the git, but he'd never wanted Snape punished like that. Minutes passed and Harry's scar burned in pain.

Voldemort released Snape and watched as Snape tried to regain his composure. "I want that poison the next time you arrive here. I am also sick of your reports. They are never very informative. The old fool is too careful to let you learn anything." He watched Snape return to the bowing position. "You are strong, Severus. I want you to pledge your loyalty to me openly. I am tired of having to hide such a strong person."

"But, my Lord, my position is so close to the old fool. Is it wise to lose such a spy?"

"Crucio! Do not presume that you can question my decisions." Voldemort removed the curse and waited until Snape returned to the bowing posture. "At the battle for Hogsmeade, I want you to remove your mask. That is if you're loyal to me, you will. If you don't, I will have Bella kill you. She has been itching for your hide since you gave testimony against her all those many years ago."

"Yes, my Lord, as you wish." Snape said, bowing even lower. He looked up at Voldemort. "I will lose my position as a teacher."

"Yes, yes. I know that, Severus. It is all right. I have enough spies in that school. Draco tells me that you took points from several Slytherins. These are the lost ones, I suppose."

"Yes, my Lord."

"It is too bad that you lost so many bright minds to Potter and Dumbledore. A horrible mistake, really. Crucio!" This time Snape screamed the agony he felt. Harry's scar exploded with the pain Voldemort's amusement caused him. "Severus," he said lifting the spell, "do not disappoint me again. You might not live until the battle to prove your allegiance to me. Go, get out of my sight before I kill you!"

"I will prove to you, my master and Lord, where my allegiances lay at the battle."

Harry watched as Severus all but ran from the room. Voldemort laughed with pleasure. He looked at the floor where Snape had been

lying. There was blood there. Snape's body hadn't taken the punishment too well.

Harry woke, swallowing a scream. He put on his glasses and glanced at the clock. It was only one in the morning, but Harry needed a walk. He put on some robes and walked out of the Tower. He absently wandered the castle, listening carefully for Filch. He was going up one of the staircases leading out of the Entrance Hall when one of the doors opened. It was Snape. Harry was about to duck around the corner quickly when Snape called out, "Is that you, Potter?"

"Yes," he answered stepping out of the shadows. Snape's voice sounded harsh.

"And what are you doing up and about at this hour?" Harry and Snape met in the middle of Entrance Hall.

"I had a disturbing vision tonight. What are you going to choose, Snape?" Harry knew Snape understood him.

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Potter."

"The last time you said that, you understood me perfectly."

"Do not make me punish you, Potter. Now, go back to bed."

"Your voice is very sore. You should take something for the cough you must have. We wouldn't want you in pain tomorrow," Harry said bitterly and stormed up the stairs for the Gryffindor Tower.

He had always trusted Dumbledore's opinion of the man, but if he was seriously thinking of going to join Voldemort, Harry wasn't sure of what to do. He didn't even know if he should tell Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.

"Why do I always know stuff I don't want to?" Harry said aloud to the empty common room. "Why do I have to think about all of this?"

Chapter Seventeen: The Quidditch Game From Hell

Every cloud has a silver lining.
Proverb

Harry spent the next two weeks training the Quidditch team for their game on the second Saturday of the month. The weather had turned nasty again the week of the game and Ron was complaining every moment he got. Katie and Harry were worried about the conduct of the Slytherin team. There had been no attacks among the supporters as there normally were. The Slytherins were actually all behaving themselves. The Slytherin Quidditch team ignored all Gryffindors. They would walk wide circles around any Gryffindor in the hallways and sat as far from them as possible in class.

The D.A. still met once a week, though Harry had to cut training with Thia down to one day both weeks. In class they were going over the rules and basic techniques of dueling. Thia had told him that the actual dueling wouldn't start until after the game. She didn't want any of the aggression between the two houses to come out in the class.

The Thursday before the game was their last practice. Draco was furious, because Katie had booked the pitch for that day back in September. The Slytherins were going to practice the night before the game. Harry hoped they all caught colds.

Friday came and went. Their homework was surprisingly light. Harry thought it was because of the games, but he had no proof. But Professor McGonagall wished Ron and Harry good luck at the end of their Transfiguration class that morning. (Harry had successfully changed his hand into a basket also. He wasn't sure what he was going to do with that knowledge, but he did manage to do it.)

That evening Harry made his way up to the hospital wing. He wanted a dreamless sleep potion that night so that he would get a decent sleep. He didn't want to be tired.

"Madam Pomfrey?" Harry asked, looking around for her.

“Yes, dear?” Madam Pomfrey asked popping her head out her office door. She smiled at him and asked, “Here to make sure I have a bed ready for you?”

“No,” Harry answered embarrassed. He somehow managed to spend more than a week in one of those beds every year. “I was, um, wondering if I could, um.” Now that it came to asking for it, he found he couldn’t.

“What is it, dear? I have a potion brewing that I must get back to.”

“I was wondering,” Harry replied strongly, convincing himself that he could do this, “if I could get a Dreamless Sleep Potion for the night. I have trouble with nightmares and I wanted a decent sleep for the game tomorrow.”

“A decent sleep so that you can get yourself knocked off your broom one minute into the game and spend the next three days fighting for your survival?”

“No,” Harry answered with a smile. Madam Pomfrey could always find the danger in the activities of life. “So that I can stay on my broom and see the bludger coming for my head. A good sleep would greatly improve my chances of not being injured.”

“Yes, that’s true,” she added thoughtfully. “If you have trouble with them, why haven’t you asked me for one earlier?”

“Because I read that you can build up a resistance to it. I don’t want to build a resistance, so that I can take it when I need it. Normally, I can deal with the nightmares.” She seemed slightly impressed and told him to wait.

“Here you go. Take this nine to ten hours before you want to be up or you’ll sleep through the game.”

“Thank you, Madam.”

“It’s nothing, Harry. You beat those Slytherins,” she added smiling.

“You were a Gryffindor?”

“Of course, now go!”

Harry woke up at eight the next morning. He noticed that everyone else was already up and tried to remember the last time that had happened. It was the first day of classes and that had been caused by a potion also.

Harry hurried down to the Great Hall and made sure his team ate something. Natalie was in pieces. This was her first game and Harry couldn't help but feel sorry for her. He had been a wreck his first game too.

They headed down early to check the pitch conditions. The ground was soggy, but the rain had stopped and the wind had dropped. The grey would make the quaffle stick out, but the dimness of the day would make it hard to see the snitch.

Back in the locker room everyone changed for the game. They wore scarlet red Quidditch robes and Harry felt the calm before a game settle over him. He loved flying; he belonged in the air. He would catch the snitch right from under Malfoy's nose.

“Ok, conditions aren't perfect, but they're better than we had hoped for,” Katie started nervously.

“So, we spent all that time in the rain for nothing?” Ron complained loudly.

“No you, idiot,” Harry said, hitting Ron's head. “It could still rain and you needed all the help you could get.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Katie said appreciating his help. “As I was saying, the conditions aren't great. I think the snitch will be hard to see, right Harry?” Harry nodded. “That means we need to score and run the total up. And Ron, don't you dare let one quaffle through or I'll have you practicing every night, regardless of the weather.”

“Oh, thanks, Katie,” Ron mumbled mournfully.

“Madam Pomfrey told us that she wanted us to win,” Harry said, taking over from Katie. “She was a Gryffindor, back in her day. I know McGonagall would love it if we won. And to beat Draco will be a huge pleasure. Especially since he’s the Slytherin captain. Now, he picked a team more on the huge, moronic side of the scale. So watch out for foul play. Don’t expect a whistle, because if Madam Hooch isn’t looking in the right direction, she won’t see it.”

“Just play your hardest,” Katie continued, “and do what you do in practice. Harry will try to catch the snitch as soon as possible. Now, let’s go.”

They walked out onto the pitch, Dean calling out their names, “Sloper, Kirke, MacDonald, Weasley, Weasley, Bell, and Potter!” The Slytherins, dressed in their green Quidditch robes, were already on the pitch waiting for them in the center.

“Ok, captains shake hands,” Madam Hooch instructed the three players. Katie shook Draco’s hand first and Harry could tell he was trying to break her fingers. Then Harry and Malfoy shook hands and they had a nice little fight. Harry was happy to see Malfoy win. “Ok, I want a nice fair game. On three. One. Two. Three.” She threw the quaffle and Harry pushed off and was in the air.

“And Bell with the quaffle. She passes to Weasley. Weasley ducks around the bludger hit at her by Goyle. She passes to MacDonald. MacDonald with a break away. It’s just her and the Slytherin keeper, Bletchley. She’s flying for the right goal post. Wait, it’s just a feint; she scores in the left one! Gryffindor with the first points of the game!”

Harry clapped and then concentrated on finding the snitch. He was flying high above the pitch out of the way of the game and circling slowly. Draco was copying him, but was on the other side of the pitch. Harry hoped that Malfoy would stay there.

“Pucey with the quaffle, he throws it to Pritchard. Ooo, that bludger had to hurt.” Kirke had sent a bludger at Pucey, but it hit him too late. Pucey seemed to be all right, but he rubbed his shoulder painfully. “Pritchard throws to Bole. Weasley tries to intercept, but has to duck

a bludger sent by Crabbe. Bole throws to Pucey, Puecy passes it quickly off to Pritchard but it's a weak throw. Seems that shoulder's a bit tender."

It was just Ron and Pritchard now. Harry stopped the nearly hopeless task of hunting for the snitch and watched. Pritchard was flying to the left, but Ron stayed right in front of the middle goal. That was a good idea, because Pritchard quickly changed direction and shot it at the right goal. Ron caught it with ease and passed the quaffle to Katie.

Harry looked closely at the Gryffindor goal posts. Was that the snitch? Harry flew slowly toward them and then saw that it was the snitch flying just inches below the middle hoop. He put on a spurt of speed and shot at it. "It seems Harry Potter has seen the snitch. Get out of the way, Ron!" Ron didn't move quickly enough and Harry had to swerve to miss a collision with him. Harry turned his broom sharply and that's when it started.

Harry felt something connect with the back of his head. He heard Madam Hooch's whistle as he shook his head, trying to clear the stars in his vision.

"Harry, you all right?" Ron asked worriedly. Madam Hooch was yelling at Crabbe.

"Yeah, what happened?" His vision cleared and he flew over to the huddle his team had made.

"Crabbe took a swing at your head," Katie answered. "It's one of their favorite ploys. Hear him saying that he thought it was a bludger?"

"Who should take the shot?" Natalie asked nervously.

"Katie or Ginny," Harry answered quickly. He spotted Malfoy using the time to find the missing snitch. "You girls choose. I'm going hunting." Harry zoomed away from the huddle and started flying circles above everyone. Katie took the penalty shot and made it.

"That's 50-0 Gryffindor!" Dean's voice floated over the cheers. Harry watched as Goyle hit the tail of Katie's broom. Luckily, it was a good

broom and took the impact well, but it sent her spinning and Madam Hooch blew her whistle. Ginny took the penalty and, “60-0 Gryffindor!”

Harry’s jaw dropped as Bletchley, their keeper, flew right at Ginny and swung at her. Unfortunately for him, he hit and Madam Hooch blew again. Natalie took this shot and Dean’s voice screamed, “70-0 Gryffindor. Ginny Weasley has the quaffle. Yes folks, that’s blood coming from her nose. That cheating scum...”

“Dean,” McGonagall’s warning voice carried over the pitch.

“Come on, Professor, he took a swing at her.”

“I don’t care. If you can’t be unbiased I’ll take that microphone away.”

“Yes, Professor. So, Katie Bell scored just a little bit ago, so that makes it 80-0 Gryffindor. Natalie MacDonald with the quaffle she stole from Bole. She’s flying toward the goal, no one’s in front of her. She... she... You bloody cheater!” Pucey had flown right into Natalie and grabbed her flying hair. He pulled her from the broom, but she had grabbed the stick just before she fell.

“Mr. Pucey,” Madam Hooch’s voice carried over the silent pitch, “that is one of the most pathetic fouls I have ever seen. Miss MacDonald, please take your penalty shot.” Natalie scored and Pritchard took possession of the quaffle and shot toward Ron.

“Pritchard’s gaining ground on, no wait, where’d Bell come from. She’s ahead of him and turning around to challenge him. What the... He can’t do that!” Madam Hooch’s whistle blew once again and Harry was about ready to forfeit the game just to protect his chasers. Goyle had sent a hex at Katie and she was sporting a nice boil on her cheek.

“Katie Bell takes the penalty shot for Gryffindor and she scores! That’s 100-0 Gryffindor!”

Harry decided that it was time he took Malfoy down a few pegs. He flew nearer to the Slytherin seeker and went into a nosedive. Harry loved this feeling, but he was concentrating on the Wronski Feint. He

watched the ground approach quickly. With any luck, Malfoy was on his tail. Just before he hit he pulled up from the dive and shot straight up in the air. He heard Draco crash.

“And that folks is the Wronski Feint. An excellent Feint, in my opinion. The game is paused to see if the ferret...”

“Mr. Thomas, once more and I’ll take that away!”

“Yes, Professor. And the Slytherin captain is all right. Madam Hooch gives the quaffle back to Ginny who had it, you cheating scum!” McGonagall didn’t even say anything to Dean. Bole had punched Ginny in the face, for the second time that game. “Madam Hooch awards Gryffindor a penalty shot and the score’s... 110-0 Gryffindor. Bole with the quaffle. He passes to Pritchard. Pritchard to Pucey. Pucey back to Pritchard. Pritchard shoots and... scores. 110-10 Gryffindor.”

Harry had spent the whole time looking for the snitch, but he couldn’t see it. He watched Bole punch Kirke, but Madam Hooch didn’t see it because Goyle had taken a swing at Natalie’s broom and had broken a few twigs from the end. Madam Hooch called a referee’s time and helped Natalie fix it. Then Natalie scored her penalty shot.

Katie took the quaffle from Pucey, but he elbowed her and Madam Hooch called another penalty for clobbering. This was just ridiculous. The game couldn’t go anywhere, because there were too many penalties.

The game went on for an hour; the score was now 240-100 Gryffindor. Most of the Gryffindor points were penalties. The Slytherins wouldn’t give them a chance to score otherwise. All three girls had bloody noses at one point. So had Ron, when Goyle had sent an illegal bludger at him. Kirke had two black eyes from punches Madam Hooch hadn’t seen. Sloper’s left eye was swollen shut from taking Crabbe’s beater club. The back of Harry’s head was bleeding from another hit from Goyle.

But in that whole time, the snitch remained hidden. It was starting to worry Harry. He needed to end this game. He motioned for a timeout and Madam Hooch gave it to them.

"Is everyone all right?" Harry asked as soon as everyone was near enough to hear.

"Sure," Katie replied grumpily. "They should make Slytherin forfeit!"

"Here, Sloper, let me heal that eye a bit." Harry motioned for him to fly closer and pulled his wand from his robes. He said a quick healing charm and Sloper opened his eye. "Just keep fighting back. I'm looking hard. Do you think Malfoy will fall for the Feint again?"

"Change it up a bit," Ron answered thoughtfully. "Fly at the stand base. He won't think you'd do the Feint like that."

"Ok, everyone, time to start again." Madam Hooch handed Ginny the quaffle and blew her whistle. That was when Harry felt the first drop of rain. Soon it was pouring like it had been all week. The wind picked up and Harry started to get cold.

He waited for Gryffindor to score three times before he went sprinting at the wall. Ron was right and Malfoy was quickly on his tail. Harry pulled up and heard the sickening crunch as Draco collided with the wall. He hoped Draco had broken several bones.

Draco was, unfortunately, unhurt and circled Harry angrily. He yelled something, but the wind took the words away before Harry could hear them. Malfoy flew closer and Harry caught his words. "You mudblood! Stop with your tricks and fight me fair and square!" Harry ignored the taunts, even the indecent ones about his mum. Thia had taught him ways to keep his temper in check.

Another hour passed and the score was 480-270 Gryffindor. Katie sported a dislocated shoulder from Bletchley grabbing her hand as she flew after Bole going the other way with the quaffle. Ginny's right hand was broken from getting her finger's caught between Goyle's club wielded by Pritchard and her broom. Natalie had lost her temper when Crabbe had swung his club at her and had punched him

between his eyes. Crabbe was already in the hospital wing, unconscious with a broken nose and skull. Kirke had needed to go get another bat after Malfoy had blown up his first one. Sloper's left eye was swollen once more and his left arm hung limp at his side broken because he hadn't seen the bludger sent his way. Ron was pissed beyond reason, because they kept haversacking (having their hand still on the quaffle as it goes through the hoop) and he was about ready to blow up if they hit his sister one more time.

Harry had tried the Feint twice more, only catching Draco off guard once. He was starting to get angry. They were up by 210 points and injured beyond belief. Why wouldn't they call the game?

The weather wasn't helping anyone's mood. It had been two and a half hours of the crudest Quidditch Harry had ever played. The last hour and ten or so minutes were some of the worst weather he'd ever played in. It rivaled with the game he lost in third year.

A half hour passed and the crowd had thinned out to just Gryffindors and Slytherins and a few others. Harry circled the pitch hoping for the briefest of glimpses of the snitch. He was flying past the Slytherin's goal posts as Ginny scored their five hundred fiftieth point. That's when he saw it; down below him almost directly. When he was right over it he nosedived at it.

"Potter, I'm not falling for that again!" Draco shouted down at Harry as Draco flew over him.

Harry knew he had it the second he started that dive. He was almost there. Just a few more inches and the game would be over. He reached out his hand and felt his hand wrap around it. He pulled out of the dive, just feet from the ground and held it up in the air. There must have been cheering, but Harry couldn't hear it over the thunder. The game was finally over. The score was 700-310.

"That was the foulest, sloppiest, most pathetic game I've ever played!" Katie shouted when she entered the locker room. She threw her boom at a wall. "Why didn't they just call it so that the Slytherin's wouldn't have the chances to kill us that they did?"

"You guys did great," Harry said after Katie sat angrily on the bench. "Let's see, Jack can't see and doesn't have a usable left arm. Ginny's nose is broken and so is her hand. Katie has a dislocated shoulder and a broken nose. Natalie is my new role model. You took out Crabbe. I've been meaning to do that for years! She also has a broken nose. Ron, you're black and blue and I don't think it's just from the cold. So are you, Andrew. I think you still have a little wood in you. And me, well, I'm bleeding and bruised and pissed that they let my team get hurt like this!"

"As am I, Potter," McGonagall said waspishly. "Unfortunately, there is no way we can call a game. Not after it has started at least. I will make sure the Slytherin team is put on probation. Get changed and shower to warm up a bit. Then head straight to the hospital wing and make sure Poppy writes all of your injuries down." She turned and walked to the door. Once there, she stopped and turned. "Thank you for keeping your tempers. It makes getting them suspended much easier."

At dinner that night all the school could talk about was the fact that Slytherin's team had been disbanded until further notice. Several of the D.A. Slytherins and their friends had already appealed the decision, asking for a new captain and a new team. The staff was considering it.

The other houses were impressed with Gryffindor's play and attitudes. Any other year, the team would have attacked those Slytherins and beat them into a pulp. This year, Harry had told them to give the Slytherins the silent treatment.

Not only had the Slytherin team been suspended, but they also had lost 50 points each, for a total of 350 points. Slytherin had a total of 39 points in their hour cup; the lowest they'd had for years. Gryffindor on the other hand had gained 200 points for the game. Harry couldn't believe it.

The next day at noon Harry headed to train with Thia. The Gryffindors wanted him to stay and celebrate some more, but Harry knew that he needed to train. He also wanted to see if Tonks was here this week. She had still been out of it over the last weekend, but she had woken

up last Monday. Remus was excited about that, and had sent a letter telling Harry about how some anonymous tipper had told them the counter curse. Harry couldn't help but wonder if it had been Snape.

"Harry!" There was Tonks, sitting comfortably in a squashy, fluffy armchair. Remus was sitting on the desk next to her and Thia was at her desk correcting. Tonks looked... Well there wasn't any other word but normal. She had the Black looks. She had long black hair, a beautiful face structure, and gorgeous black eyes. She looked a lot like Sirius had before Azkaban, only more feminine. "Congratulations on winning yesterday. Remus told me all about it. I wish the doctors would have let me go." She was hyper-sounding, but Harry could tell she didn't have that much energy.

"You were there, Remus?" Harry asked the smiling man.

"Yes," he replied. "My sister invited me and I couldn't turn down the chance to watch you play again. Those were some nice Wronski Feints."

"Thanks, diving comes naturally, so Draco didn't have a chance," Harry answered slightly embarrassed.

"I'm proud of how you kept your temper, Harry," Thia said proudly.

"Yeah, I'm glad I did too. Professor McGonagall said it made it easier to punish the Slytherins."

"It sure did," Thia answered solemnly. "And it got you those extra points. What do you think about the appeal?"

"I think they should give the team to Blaise or maybe Sephra, 'cause she's played before. They aren't going to cheat like that. And Slytherin is so far out of the playing; we don't need to worry about them."

"I wouldn't say that," Remus said meditatively. "They scored a nice amount, also. And as it always goes for long games, your points are doctored slightly, to make it fair for the other teams that won't be

playing such long games. It'll be interesting to see how this year ends."

"Now, back to business, Tonks is here to observe," Thia stated. "She doesn't have any magical reserves, so she can't duel even if she wanted to. Remus is going to duel with you first."

Harry enjoyed his duels with Remus. Remus was quick, much faster than Thia and his quickness helped improve Harry's reflexes. He also fought completely differently. Whereas Tonks and Thia were both Ministry trained, Remus learnt most everything he knew through real duels with the Death Eaters during the first war. After Hogwarts Remus couldn't join the Ministry because he was a werewolf, so he had devoted his whole time to the Order.

Harry woke up slowly from the stunner Remus had hit him with. He sat up and looked at the laughing Tonks. "Glad someone's amused," he mumbled grumpily. He watched her laugh and couldn't help but smile too. She clapped at the bowing Remus and Harry noticed something glitter on her finger. "What's that?" he asked pointing at her left hand.

Harry couldn't understand why Remus had blushed scarlet or why the two women were laughing even harder.

"It's called a ring, Harry," Thia said in a voice one would use with a three year old. "People wear them on fingers as jewelry."

"I know that!" Harry irritably said. "But, why is she wearing it on her left hand. Unless..." Harry looked at the blushing Remus, the beaming Tonks, and laughing Thia. "You didn't?" Harry asked Remus surprised.

"And why shouldn't he?" Tonks replied sharply. Harry realized his mistake and apologized to Tonks.

"I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I just never thought Remus would actually ask."

"I asked her the first time they let me see her on Tuesday." Remus shrugged at Harry. He walked over to Tonks and hugged her. "When she was in her coma, all I could think of was what would happen if she died. I decided that when she awoke, I would ask her to marry me. She's too important to me to let her die without telling her. I bought the ring last week. What do you think?"

"I only have one question: When's the wedding?" Harry laughed at Remus's expression. "You did know that you have to marry her now, right?"

Remus hurled himself at Harry and they wrestled for a moment on the ground. Harry ended up winning, with Remus pinned to the ground. "You're getting old, old man."

"When did you get so strong, Harry?" Remus asked getting up. The girls were laughing hysterically.

"Don't change the subject. And I've been lifting weights all summer and fall. Now, when's the wedding?"

"We aren't sure," Tonks answered once she got herself under control. "Neither of us have a lot of cash at the moment. But we don't want to wait too long."

"Your parents got married," Remus went on, "much sooner than your grandparents had wanted. They hadn't been dating for more than a year when they got engaged. But they told their parents that as fighters in the war, they didn't want to wait until it was too late. They ended up getting married June 21 one year after they got engaged."

"Sirius and I got married," Thia started when Remus finished, "about six months after our first date. Of course we both had crushes on the other at several different times during school and after, but never at the same time. It's a good thing, because we were married a little over two years when he was sent to Azkaban."

"Oh," Harry said thoughtfully. "So if you had the money, when would you get married?"

“Summer,” Tonks said.

“Christmas,” Remus said at the same time. Harry and Thia laughed at the couple. “Whenever the bride wants to,” Remus answered courteously. “That’s what James and Sirius both did and they surprisingly had good marriages.”

“That’s only because they had good wives,” Thia added. “Without Lily and me they would have been lost.”

“So Tonks, this summer or next?” Harry asked, a plan shaping in his mind.

“This summer, why?” she asked suspiciously.

“Because if I don’t know these things, Ginny and Hermione are going to hang me upside down by my toes. And I definitely don’t want to do that.”

“Ok, enough chit chat. Ready Harry?” Thia asked pulling out her wand.

“Wait, aren’t we going to talk about the last duel?” Harry asked looking at Tonks. He wanted to hear her opinion.

They spent the rest of the time talking about the duels and actually dueling. Harry enjoyed working with these three people immensely. They had a good sense of humor and knew a lot about fighting the dark arts. Harry left the room sore but happy. He couldn’t wipe the smile off his face.

“He what?” Ron asked choking on his food.

“He proposed to Tonks,” Harry repeated with a smile.

“That’s so sweet,” Ginny said, squeezing Harry’s hand under the table. Harry was glad that Madam Pomfrey was able to heal it perfectly. He would have missed holding it.

“When?” Hermione asked, pulling her nose out of the Runes textbook she was reading.

“Tuesday, when he first saw her awake.”

“When are they getting married?” Ginny asked happily.

“They aren’t sure yet,” Harry answered, wondering if he should tell them his plan. “They don’t have enough money saved for a wedding, so they’re going to wait.” He took a bit of potatoes. “They don’t want to wait too long though, just in case.”

“Just in case of what?” Ron asked around some vegetables.

“In case they die fighting, you idiot,” Ginny answered teasingly. “What are you thinking, Harry?” He looked at her surprised and then kissed her cheek. Ginny was surprised by his action; he had never kissed her so publicly. Harry just smiled; he was glad Ginny was surprised and pleased by the simple action.

“I was wondering if I should help pay for it. You know as a thank you gift for everything they’ve done.” He shook his head. “With the money my parents left me and the money from the WWW that Fred and George are trying to shove down my throat, I have more than enough for myself. I haven’t seen Remus so happy before. I don’t want them to miss out on this.”

“That’s a great idea, Harry,” Hermione said quietly. “But they aren’t going to take that money willingly. You’ll have to convince them.”

“I know. I was thinking we’d surprise them with it,” Harry replied.

“And how would you do that?” Ginny asked curiously.

“By having you ladies and Thia find out what Tonks wants, and then us guys figuring out what Remus wants.” He took a sip of juice. “I think we could get your mum to help, and Thia would for sure. Bill and the twins would help too, I think.”

"That's a great idea," Hermione said brightly. "But when would we have it?"

"Tonks wanted to have it this summer," Harry answered before eating a spoonful of stew. The two girls looked at him strangely. "I knew you two would want to know that so I asked."

"Harry, when did you get so smart?" Ginny asked perplexed. Harry blushed and looked at her strangely. "Ron would never even have thought about asking."

Harry shrugged. "You want to do something next weekend?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

"Sure, this time I get to plan it though," Ginny answered with a strange smile.

"I don't want to see that smile on your lips, missy," Ron answered disgustedly. "I don't even want you to think about using that smile."

"But why not, Ron?" Ginny answered sweetly. "I thought you like it when Hermione uses it?" Both Hermione and Ron blushed, Hermione's cheeks turning red and Ron's ears turning redder. "Tsk, ts. Double standards."

"Ginny leave them be," Harry whispered in her ear. He raised his voice so that Hermione could hear the next sentence also, "Why don't you girls write Tonks asking all about it. She won't be so suspicious if you start finding out all about how he proposed."

"Who proposed to who?" Lavender asked from next to Hermione. She had just sat down.

"Remember Professor Lupin?" Ginny answered. Lavender nodded. "He asked an Auror friend of ours to marry him. She was the Auror that survived protecting Fudge."

"Oh, that's sweet," Lavender said, buttering a roll. "How do you know her?"

“Family friend,” Ginny answered briefly. “She works in the Ministry and so does my dad. Her dad was muggle-born, so my dad likes to ask her questions about muggle things.”

“Oh,” she answered absently. “Hey Parvati, Professor Lupin’s getting married.”

“Oh, I’m glad,” Parvati answered. “He was such a nice man, even if he was a werewolf. To who?”

“You know that Auror that was in St. Mungo’s? He’s marrying her.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Hey, Mary do you understand that Transfiguration homework?”

“Yeah, I’ll explain it in the library later.”

Harry shook his head as Mary (a Hufflepuff) and Parvati started talking about Remus and Tonks; by tomorrow morning everyone at Hogwarts would know.

Chapter Eighteen: The Power of Rumors

When you are with me

I'm free... I'm careless... I believe...

Above all others we'll fly.

Creed: My Sacrifice

The next Saturday night, Harry nervously followed Ginny . She led him to the Room of Requirement, and Harry watched Ginny pace in front of it three times. After the third time, a door appeared. It was a wood door with curly cast iron decorations. She opened it and motioned for Harry to follow her into the room.

Harry stopped when he caught sight of it. It was ornately and elegantly decorated in reds and golds, blues and silvers. He saw a small table for two in the center of the small room, next to a fireplace that was burning cheerfully. On the other side of the room was a small couch, a love seat really. Harry gulped as the door shut behind him; he was no good at this sort of thing.

Dobby appeared with the appetizers, and Ginny led Harry to the table by his hand. He pulled out her seat and pushed it in. He sat across from her nervously.

"So, what do you think?" Ginny asked apprehensively.

"Romantic," Harry answered after he took a quick drink of water; his mouth had gone very dry.

"I love it," Ginny told him, enthusiastically. "On our way to Egypt we stopped at a French restaurant and it looked a lot like this."

Dobby appeared a few minutes later with the first course. It was some kind of vegetable soup and Harry enjoyed it. Ginny and Harry talked about school and Quidditch. They were at ease with one another, but Harry couldn't get over the decorations.

The main course was lamb with herbs and seasonings. Harry thought that it was delicious, and he was surprised to realize that the décor didn't bother him so much anymore.

When they were finished with that course, Harry watched Ginny as she talked. He didn't take in a word that she said, but he was mesmerized by the firelight reflecting off of her hair.

"Harry, are you even listening to me?" Ginny asked with indignation. He shook his head as if coming out of a trance. "What were you thinking about?"

"How beautiful you look tonight," Harry answered truthfully. Ginny stared at him, completely stunned. At that moment, Dobby appeared once again with dipping chocolate and cut fruit. He left with the dirty dishes and leftover food.

Ginny, coming out of her shock, smiled at him and dipped a piece of banana in the chocolate. Harry followed suit with a piece of pineapple.

"Do you mean that?" Ginny asked timidly.

"Of course I do, Gin. Why would I lie?" Harry asked perplexed.

"Maybe so you'll get some tonight," Ginny answered sheepishly.

"And have your six brothers, father, and mother after my hide," Harry answered with a laugh. "No, I don't think so. I can deal with a Dark Lord, but having seven angry Weasley men and Molly Weasley after me? Nope, can't handle that." He was happy when she laughed too. "Gin, I'm not ready for that yet," he added quietly when she had stopped laughing.

"Good, 'cause neither am I," Ginny replied softly. Harry dipped a strawberry and, while chewing it, he remembered Ron saying that it was her favorite fruit.

"You want one?" he asked pointing to a strawberry. She nodded and Harry dipped it. He reached over the table and carefully fed it to her.

She closed her eyes and savored the taste. The look of pleasure and contentment on her face was absolute.

They ate the rest of the fruit in silence, feeding one another every so often. Harry was completely happy. He forgot about school. He forgot about his nightmares. He forgot about those he had lost. He even forgot about the Prophecy. All he could think about was this one beautiful girl who had captured his heart.

When the fruit was gone, Ginny stood and walked over to the fire. Harry followed her and stood next to her, looking down at her stunningly beautiful face. After a few minutes under his intense gaze, Ginny blushed a deep red.

"Stop that," Ginny finally said angrily. She turned her back to him.

"Stop what?" Harry asked not taking his eyes off of her.

"That," she replied sharply.

"What?"

"Looking at me like that," she explained crossly. "It freaks me out."

"How else should I look at you?" Harry asked confused.

"Just don't stare."

"Fine," he said turning from her and staring into the fire. Several minutes passed in uncomfortable silence. Harry felt bad for staring at Ginny. "Gin, I'm..."

"Harry, I'm..." They laughed and Ginny motioned for Harry to continue.

"I'm sorry for staring," he apologized. "But you look so wonderful and I can't understand why you like me." He held up his hand to stop her interruption. "I feel so lucky. I have this great, adopted family with your six brothers and your parents, Hermione and Thia, Tonks and Remus. And now, well..." He trailed off. His fingers ran through his

already messy hair. "Gin, to be honest, I don't really know what love is. I know what loyalty and friendship are. But I've never had the chance to learn what love is." He stopped and silence fell. Just as Ginny opened her mouth to speak, he continued, "And I now have you. And," he said shyly, "I think you're teaching me how to love. But I really have no clue."

Ginny just stared at him with her mouth opened. "Oh, Harry. I'm sorry I snapped at you. The twins used to stare at me at meals and it's always bugged me." She stopped and hugged him. From where she stood, she continued, "I'm so sorry you can't recognize the love you have, give, and receive. Harry, you're one of the most loving people I've ever met. And you receive heaps of love from your friends, classmates, teachers, acquaintances, and adopted family." He looked down at her stunned, but she just smiled at him. "Harry, it's so obvious. How can everyone see it, but you can't?"

"See, Gin, I need you to show that to me. I need you to teach me to see that," Harry said earnestly. "I know it's there; I just have a hard time seeing it. Will you teach me how?" the plea in his voice broke her heart.

"Well, how about I show you how I feel?" She led the confused Harry to the loveseat. He sat down and she snuggled up to him. She leaned over and started to kiss the man she loved with her whole being.

An hour later, a very happy and content Harry and Ginny met a very angry and disgruntled Ron. "Where have you been?" he nearly yelled, causing some of the students to turn and look.

"Night, Harry," Ginny said, kissing him goodnight. Harry wrapped her in a tight embrace, not caring about the common room filled with students.

"Night, Gin," Harry said breathlessly after the kiss. He watched her climb the stairs to the girl's dorm and disappear through the door.

"Where have you been and what have you been doing?" Ron asked almost frantically. His voice caused even more students to turn to watch.

Harry sank happily into his favorite chair. Ginny was the most amazing woman in the world. They had talked while they were making out. She got him to tell her things that he needed to say, but couldn't. He told her about most of his common nightmares and his fears about the future.

"Harry Potter, answer me!" Ron shouted. Harry for the first time looked at his best friend. He was livid and beet red. "Where have you been and what have you been doing with my sister!"

"Nothing, Ron. It was just a date," Harry said with a huge grin.

"Just a date? Why don't I believe that?" Ron asked incredulously. "You were gone for too long!"

"We talked about stuff, Ron," Harry answered him, getting a little peeved. "What's it to you?"

"She's my sister, Harry!" Ron yelled back, ignoring Hermione's urgent tugs on his sleeve. "She will always be my concern!"

"Why are you so worried?" Harry asked nearly shouting now.

"Because she's had a crush on you for years," Ron stated angrily and loudly. "Because I don't trust the two of you together!"

"What? Are you worried I'm going to shag her?" Harry asked yelling back. Hermione let out a loud sigh and muttered something that sounded a lot like, "Males."

"Yes, I am!" Ron shouted back.

"Ronald Bilius Weasley!" the sweet voice of Ginny shouted down at him from the entrance to the girl's dorm. "Leave Harry alone. If you're worried about us, talk to me. If you must yell, do not yell in a common room full of people eavesdropping. Do you have no faith in your best friend and younger sister?" She had walked down and was now standing next to Harry. "If you're not careful, you'll join Percy on my 'not family' list. You were pushing for this for months, if not years.

Now that it has happened, LEAVE! US! ALONE!” She glared at him and then leaned over and gave Harry another kiss. “Night, Harry.”

“Night, Gin,” Harry said with a laugh. Only Ginny could get away with that. He watched her once again walk up the stairs and through the door. Harry looked at Ron and realized that he was still mad. “If you want to talk, I’ll be in the dorm.” Harry left the fuming Ron and went to their room.

He got out his homework, the little that he had left, and did it on his bed. He was disappointed that Ron didn’t come up. He knew that he needed to work this out with him. He just couldn’t believe that Ron would think that he would sleep with Ginny.

Breakfast the next morning was strained. Ron was still angry with Harry and Ginny and he refused to talk to either of them. Hermione was divided between her boyfriend and Harry and Ginny. She just thought that the whole argument was stupid, but she couldn’t get Ron to see that. The worst part of this mess was that the whole school knew about it.

Harry thought that this argument now held the record of the fastest spread rumor at Hogwarts. People had stared at Ginny and Harry. Some of the guys gave Harry the thumbs up. Some the girls frowned at him. Harry found out at lunch that the story had changed from Ron being worried that Harry would sleep with Ginny to Ron was angry because Harry had slept with Ginny.

The next few days were horrible. Harry and Ginny had to explain over and over again that they hadn’t slept together and weren’t planning on it. Ron wouldn’t talk to Harry, and classes became boring without Ron there to make fun of the teachers or the lessons. Hermione had decided to stick with Ron and try to make him see the truth. Ginny was pissed at Ron, and Harry had to keep her from knocking Ron’s front teeth out. Quidditch practice on Wednesday was a strained event. Katie took over the practice because Harry didn’t want to do anything to get Ron even angrier.

Friday came with no changes in the rift. Harry felt almost as bad as he did before the first task. If not for Ginny, this week would have

been the worst week he had ever spent at Hogwarts. Harry was looking forward to the Defense class that afternoon. Up until this week, they had been practicing the basics. This week had been one-on-one duels in every class, for the whole period. Today would be a tournament of the top three duelers for this week. They would each duel twice and the two with the best record would duel again. Harry was number one in the class, Draco was second, and surprisingly Neville was third.

Harry's first duel was with Draco. Harry would have won hands down, had Draco not broken the rules. They weren't to use spells classified as dangerous or dark. Malfoy had used a spell classified as both. It surprised Harry just enough that he had to scramble to get a shield up in time to deflect it. Harry sent three stunners at Malfoy in quick succession: one at his heart, one to his right, and the other to his left. The one to his right hit Malfoy. When Harry woke him up, he was extremely disoriented and Harry volunteered for the next duel with Neville.

The duel with Neville was a quick thing too. Harry was too advanced for anyone in this class. He did pull his level down a bit, but he didn't want to play stupid.

It was the duel between Neville and Draco that raised eyebrows. It started out as was expected.

"Stupefy!" Draco shouted at the boy.

"Protego!" Neville shouted and the shield reflected the stunner right at Draco. Malfoy had to dive to the floor to avoid it. "Twicodio!" The hex hit Malfoy's back and Harry laughed as Draco's ears started to twitch.

"You scum," Malfoy muttered angrily at Neville. "Furniculus!"

Neville dodged the spell easily and said calmly, "Demuta Ferrus!" Harry thought that he would die from laughter. Sitting where Malfoy had just been was a white ferret with wiggling ears. "Stupefy!"

"Very good, Mr. Longbottom. Please change him back and wake him up," Thia said with the smallest of smiles on her face.

“Ennervate!” Neville said with a laugh. The ferret woke up and started chattering angrily at Neville. “I cannot seem to remember the counter-spell. That’s just too bad.”

“Mr. Longbottom, if you can’t change him back, he automatically wins,” Thia warned the boy.

“Fine. Demuta Humano!” Draco changed back into his normal angry self.

“I’m going to tell the Headmaster on you, Longbottom. You aren’t suppose to use those kind of spells on people.”

“Yes,” Sephra said before Thia or Neville could respond. “And you’re not supposed to use Dark Arts on another, but you did. I think we should tell the Headmaster about that.” Malfoy’s face paled, and he shut his mouth angrily. Harry decided to stop laughing at the boy and prepare for the next duel. However that was easier said than done, and he was still laughing when he walked up to start his duel with Neville.

They bowed and Harry held his hand up in forfeiture. “I can’t stop laughing and I don’t want to be turned into a ferret. Neville, you win,” Harry said laughing even harder at Malfoy’s pink cheeks. “You’re a genius!” Neville bowed theatrically, and Harry laughed even harder.

“Okay, so I guess that Neville is this week’s winner,” Thia said with a smile on her face. “Something that I didn’t tell you all, was that the winner would receive 15 points for their house, have their house color and animal fill the center of the room, and win a free butterbeer on me at the next Hogsmeade trip. Which, Mr. Longbottom, is tomorrow. Here you go.” She handed him a slip of paper, and Harry and Neville sat down. They spent the rest of the class talking about the duels and the last ten minutes about the trip the next day.

Harry hoped that the events of that class would smooth things over with Ron, but they didn’t. Harry had a feeling that Ginny asking Harry if he wanted to spend the next day with her hadn’t helped. He just hoped that things would clear up with Ron soon.

“See you, Hermione,” Ginny called to her, ignoring Ron at Hermione’s side. Hermione waved and Ron scowled.

“You know, Gin, you could try and be nice to him,” Harry said patiently as they walked down the grounds. Harry could feel Thia’s eyes on him and knew that the rest of his guard would appear as soon as he left the safety of Hogwarts grounds.

“I could, but I don’t apologize for something when I’m not in the wrong,” she replied in an angry tone. Harry just shook his head.

“I didn’t say apologize, because he’s the one that needs to, but don’t make him angrier,” Harry explained. “Classes are boring with him mad at me.”

“What do you want to do?” Ginny asked changing the subject.

“Let’s go visit your other brothers,” Harry suggested. “I want to find out what they think about us.”

Ginny nodded and they headed to the Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. It was crowded and they pushed their way to the front. “Fred!” Ginny yelled over the noise.

“Oi, little sis, what are you doing here?” Fred yelled back. He caught sight of Harry and smiled. “Never mind, you’re here on a date, I see. Well, follow me. George! Company!”

A few minutes later Fred, George, Ginny, and Harry were sitting in the office. “So, Harry, keeping the good luck streak by showing up here?” Fred asked jokingly.

“Yep, thought I’d want Ginny to run off at the Three Broomsticks crying again,” Harry responded in like. “For old times sake, you know.”

“I see,” George said sagely. “Ron’s been writing to us about you two. Says he’s worried you’ll do something you shouldn’t.”

"That git!" Ginny snapped angrily. Fred and George smiled and laughed. "And what do you think about us?"

"Harry sleeps with you and we skin him alive," George answered calmly. He tried to keep a straight face looking at Harry's embarrassed face.

"If you tempt him, Ginny dear," Fred continued just as straight faced, "we'll skin you alive. If he gives in, then we'll skin both of you alive." George couldn't help it anymore. He broke out laughing and Fred joined in.

"You guys are old enough to make your own choices," George finally said. "And I trust that you'll make the right one. If not, well, we'll skin you both."

"Ron's just making trouble where there isn't any," Fred said knowingly. "He's always been the closest to you, Ginny, so he'll be the most worried. Him and Bill, that is."

"Should be fun seeing how Bill reacts to Harry this Christmas," George thought out loud. "Especially if Ron's been writing to him too."

"Thanks," Harry said bitterly. "I really appreciate your concern."

"No problem," George replied brightly.

"Well, we need to go help with the shop," Fred said sadly. "Too bad we only talked about this. Oh, you guys hear about Tonks and Remus?"

"Yeah, Harry found out two weeks ago," Ginny replied with a smile.

"You guys want to help surprise them?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"You want to give them a wedding?" George asked jokingly.

"Yeah," Ginny said smiling. "Nice guess."

“That’s great. The ultimate prank!” Fred said with a smile. “We’ll help with the finances. Remus has been a real help with ideas and developing them into products. We’re trying to find out if we can legally hire him as a product designer, or if the Ministry will send us to Azkaban for that.”

“I hate Umbridge,” George said venomously.

Harry was surprised at the hate in his voice. Usually the twins were neutral to all but their closest friends and family. People were just subjects to be pranked.

“It’s her laws,” Fred continued seeing their looks of confusion and surprise, “that are the problem.”

“Oh, those,” Harry thought angrily. “Yeah, she’s a great person, isn’t she?”

“Yeah,” Fred said rolling his eyes. “So anyway, we’ll owl you about the plans for Operation Wedding. What do you think about letting Mum, Dad, and Bill know?”

“As long as they don’t spill the beans,” Harry replied, “they can know. I want to find out what they want and the more people asking questions the less likely they will get suspicious. See you guys.”

“Bye, you love birds, you,” Fred said with a laugh.

“Don’t forget to visit Madame Puddifoot’s,” George said waving.

“We won’t,” Ginny said with a laugh. Outside she turned to Harry and said calmly, “Let’s not go to Puddifoot’s and say we did, but instead go to the Shrieking Shack and shag each other. I really want to get skinned by the twins. I think this counts as tempting.”

“Sounds good, but I don’t want your mum after me,” Harry said with a fake shudder. “Let’s just not and say we did. That should get Ron angry at us for a reason.” They were now heading to the Three Broomsticks. They spent the rest of the trip at the pub talking.

At about three they headed back to the castle and the warmth of the common room fire. Harry got out one of his advanced Defense books and started reading it on the couch near the fire. Ginny curled up next to him and read it with him. Of course that's how Ron found them an hour later. However, Harry's hand had found its way under her shirt and was lying on her stomach. Ginny had her hand covering it and was squirming when he tickled her.

"Potter, dorm, now!" Ron stuttered angrily. Harry gave Ginny an apologetic look and followed Ron up the stairs. He was just glad that the common room was nearly empty. "What were you doing?"

"Reading," Harry answered truthfully.

"Do you really have to lay next to her in public?" Ron asked almost pleadingly.

"Why?" Harry asked forcefully.

"Because of the rumors."

"The rumors are your fault, Ron," Harry said flatly. "You staying angry with us all week only made the rumors true in people's minds. Why are you so worried?"

"What does it matter why I'm worried?" Ron asked hotly.

"What have I done to deserve this distrust?" Harry asked hurt.

"I'm just worried about my little sister!" Ron shouted angrily.

"I trust you with Hermione," Harry said logically. "I meant it when I said that she's my sister. I'd beat you into a pulp if you hurt her or slept with her, but I don't follow you around or make you account for every minute you two spend alone. I trust you with her. Why can't you trust me with her?"

"I don't care about how you treat me and Hermione!" Ron shouted. "It's my little sister we're talking about!"

"She's not so little anymore, Ron!" Harry yelled back. "She can make up her own mind about who she dates!"

"But why do you guys have to encourage the rumors?" Ron asked angrily.

"We don't, Ron. You do with your anger and yelling!" Harry answered loudly. "Just give it a rest and let us be! Now, I'm going back down to the common room to continue reading with my girlfriend."

"So, Harry," Remus said seriously when Harry entered the Defense room the next afternoon. "What are these rumors I hear?"

Harry looked at Remus nervously. He couldn't know about the plans already could he? "What rumors?"

"About you sleeping with Ginny Weasley." Harry turned bright red and rolled his eyes. "I didn't think so, but I had to check. The twins told us all last night about your conversation with them yesterday."

"Those gits," Harry grumbled under his breath.

"Yes, that's what I thought, but, hey, it was good for a laugh."

"Where's Tonks?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

"She's at the doctor's," Remus said with a smile. "If he gives her the go ahead, she goes back to work tomorrow."

"Oh, good."

"Yes," Remus said with a faint smile. "I'm going to miss her at headquarters though. When she's gone, it's just me."

"Poor, poor Remy," Thia said sarcastically.

"Shut up, Thia. Let's see how good you'd be living there," he said angrily.

"I wouldn't stay sane, that's why I won't live there."

“Um, I hate to break this up, but are we going to work?” Harry asked forcefully.

“Sure thing, Harry,” Thia replied cheerfully. “You and me first.”

“Avelgule!” Harry said calmly. Thia ducked it, but Harry was surprised at how close it got to hitting her.

“Stupefy!” she shouted, hoping to catch him off guard. Harry ducked left and then dove right as her second stunner flew by him.

“Furniculus!” he cast the boil spell, hoping to distract her. “Stupefy,” he whispered. She ducked the boil spell, but was hit by the stunner.

Harry looked at Remus, stunned. Remus was just as surprised. “You whispered that spell right?” Harry nodded. “That shouldn’t have knocked her out like that.” He waked over to his little sister and said, “Ennervate!” She woke up dazed and confused. After a few minutes she was all right.

“I didn’t even hear you cast that,” Thia said surprised. “That was some stunner, Harry. How I didn’t hear it, is beyond me.”

“I whispered it, Thia,” he said quietly. She looked at him surprised.

“Really? Well, then that’s something encouraging,” she said with a smile.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked perplexed. Remus was looking at her oddly too.

“Well, that’s simple,” but she stopped when there was a knock at the door. “Come in!” The door opened and the person who had knocked walked in. It was Professor Dumbledore, and he looked happy to find Remus and Thia together.

“Harry, I must steal these wonderful people for a moment. Could I ask you to leave?” Harry nodded and went out into the hallway. The door shut behind him, but Harry found the old Extendable Ear the twins

had given him and put it in his ear. The end wiggled under the door and Harry could hear the voices clearly.

“They have finally decided on a new Minister,” Dumbledore told the two.

“It’s about time,” Remus said with more than a little anger in his voice. “The Ministry’s been a mess without a Minister and it’s only helped in Voldemort’s power gathering.”

“I am well aware of that,” Dumbledore said with his normal calm. “But they wanted to be absolutely sure that I wouldn’t take the job. After they realized that I didn’t want the job this Monday, they talked about other candidates.”

“So who’d they pick, sir?” Thia asked worriedly.

“Please take a guess,” Dumbledore said. Harry could hear the twinkle in his eyes.

“Snape,” Remus said bitterly. Harry was surprised. Remus normally got along with everyone, even Snape.

“Professor Snape, Remus,” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “And no, not Severus. Thia, your guess.”

“Tom Riddle, a.k.a. Voldemort?” Thia said with a sarcastic voice. “It wouldn’t surprise me if the Ministry handed themselves over to him.”

“No, thankfully they haven’t done that yet. It is Emmeline Vance,” Dumbledore informed them. Harry knew that she was a member of the Order of the Phoenix the first time around and was still a member.

“Really, well good for her,” Remus said cheerfully.

“That will be good for the Order, won’t it Professor,” Thia said.

“Yes it will be. And why can’t you call me Albus, Thia?” Dumbledore asked sounding slightly hurt. Harry thought he was teasing her.

“For the same reason I told you last time, sir,” Thia answered. Harry thought he heard an undertone of anger on her voice.

“Very well, Thia. I am sorry. We are all allowed our mistakes.”

“Yes, but few of us have lives at stake for them.”

“Didn’t Molly destroy all of those Extendable Ears?” Remus asked, interrupting Dumbledore and Thia’s conversation.

“Alas, she did,” Dumbledore said sadly. “They were a brilliant idea and deserved more respect and consideration than they received. Why do you ask?” There was a slight pause and Harry pulled the earpiece out of his ear and headed into the room across the hall.

“Harry James Potter, do you not know that eavesdropping is rude?” Thia asked mock-angrily.

“I think someone once told me that ,” Harry responded. “Why?”

“I think we should just destroy this,” Remus said picking up the Extendable Ear.

“No, please don’t, sir,” Harry pleaded. “It’s the only way I have of finding out about all of the gossip at this school. No one tells me it, because normally it’s about me.”

Dumbledore laughed and put his hand out for the Extendable Ear. Remus handed it to him and Dumbledore handed it to Harry. “Next time, Harry, just ask. As long as it isn’t a secret, I’ll tell you about it. It’s about time we started to tell you more. This war will be decided by you after all,” he finished sadly.

“Yeah,” Harry added, slightly bitter. “You guys mind if we call it quits for the day. I want to see if Ron will talk to me today.”

“No, we don’t mind. Go, Harry,” Thia said kindly. “Good luck. Older brothers can be a pain at times.”

“Thanks, Thia,” Remus said, pretending to be hurt.

"No problem, Remy," Thia said brightly. Harry laughed at the look of disgust on Remus' face. He did hate that nickname.

"I'll be going then," Remus said, giving his sister a scornful look. "I want to find out how Tonks' appointment went."

"See you, Moony," Thia said. "Sorry about the Remy thing, but you're face looks so precious when I call you that."

"Goodbye, Remus," Dumbledore said, shaking the man's hand.

"Mind if I walk with you, Harry?" Remus asked when the other two were gone.

"No, I wanted to talk with you anyway," Harry said steering him into an empty classroom. It was Remus' old room and Remus started a fire in the fireplace.

"Tea?" he asked. "For old times sake?" Harry smiled thinking about all the times he had spent talking with Remus here.

"Sure," Harry said. "There's no other way but to ask you out right. What should I do about Ron's over-protective attitude towards Ginny? He's never acted quite like this before."

"Well, Harry as an older brother," Remus started, handing Harry a cup of tea, "I'd have to tell you that the worst thing to do is not take him seriously. Especially if that brother is close with the girl in question. I just about killed Sirius a few times, not counting mishaps on our moonlit walks."

"But I'd never do anything to hurt her, and I'm definitely not going to sleep with her any time soon," Harry said baffled.

"It doesn't matter, Harry," Remus said, taking a sip of tea. "To be honest, it's when we feel threatened that we get really concerned about our sisters. I was all right with all of Thia's boyfriends but Sirius. And that was because I knew it would work out. And guess what, they were married within six months."

"But why would Ron be worried about Ginny and I?" Harry asked confused. "We aren't planning on marrying any time soon."

"But you've taken a spot in her heart that used to be his," Remus explained. "If she was hurt or scared she used to go to Ron, but now she'll come to you."

"Oh, I never thought of that," Harry answered. Remus took a sip of tea, thinking.

"And then there's the fact that Ron's your best friend," Remus added.

"What difference does that make?" Harry wondered out loud.

"Well, are you telling things to Ginny that you wouldn't or didn't tell Ron or Hermione?" Harry nodded. "You should have seen the panic Sirius went into when your parents got engaged. Even before that really. He was worried that James would never talk to him again. He also was jealous of the time James was spending with Lily."

"Oh, I see," Harry said thinking about all this information. "What should I do?"

"Talk with him," Remus said after taking a drink of his tea.

"But every time we talk it turns into a shouting match."

"Well, find a way to talk to him calmly."

"Easier said than done," Harry mumbled under his breath. Remus just smiled at him knowingly. "Well, I really do need to go see Tonks. Nice chatting with you, Harry."

"Thanks, Remus," Harry said shaking the man's hand. "I'll see you both next week, then."

"Most definitely."

Chapter Nineteen: Go to Hell

Let me die on my own terms.

Let me lie and let me learn.

Now I'll follow my own way,

And I'll live on to another damn day.

Freedom carries sacrifice.

3 Doors Down: Life On My Own

"Where is Ron, Hermione?" Harry asked her when he got back to the common room.

"Up in your dorm room. Why?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"I want to talk to him," Harry told her sitting in his favorite chair across from her. One good thing about being a sixth year is that your chair was almost always empty and if someone was sitting it, they usually got out of it. "What's he told you?"

"Oh, he's not really sure why he's worried. I think he's just threatened by you two," Hermione said, looking up from her book. "I wouldn't talk with him today, though. He and Ginny had another fight. She's up in her room blasting things."

"Could you get her then?" Harry asked. "I'll try and calm her down."

"Let her get the pent up anger out," Hermione advised him. "She'll feel much better after."

"Would you ask her to go flying with me then," Harry asked her. "That should give her the opportunity to vent and to talk with me."

Hermione gave him an odd look, but nodded. She sprinted up the stairs and came back with Ginny. She looked angry, really angry, and Harry started to have second thoughts about this trip.

"Hey, Gin" he said when the two girls arrived in front of the fire. He kissed her cheek. "Want to go flying with me?"

"Sure," Ginny answered crossly. They walked out hand in hand and wandered slowly out to the Quidditch pitch. They entered the Gryffindor locker room and grabbed their brooms.

Once on the pitch Harry kissed her soundly. "I heard about your fight with Ron," he said softly into her hair.

"Yeah, he's an idiot," Ginny spat out. "I'm starting to think he believes the rumors. I thought we were going flying."

"Last one to the other side has to answer one question truthfully," Harry told her. She nodded, but they both knew Harry would win. They mounted their brooms and shot off to the other side. Harry stayed next to her until the end, when he shot forward and won. He flew to her side and grabbed her hand. "What's eating at you?"

"Ron, the rumors, life in general," she answered truthfully.

"What's wrong with life?" Harry asked, slightly hurt, he was a part of that life.

"Oh, not you and me, Harry. That's a good part," she said hugging him. "It's just half the girls in the dorm believe the rumors and can't believe I would sacrifice my virginity to go out with you. They're also mad at you for using your 'influence' on me to get me to sleep with you."

"Well, that's stupid," Harry told her seriously.

"No kidding. Every night it's, 'No, I did not sleep with him.' But they don't believe me or Hermione." She sighed. "And then classes are getting hard because O.W.L.'s are this year and the teachers are trying to drive us insane. Then practice has sucked because of the weather. Hermione is hanging out with Ron all the time, trying to convince him that there isn't anything to worry about."

"I'm sorry, Gin," he said, squeezing her hand. "Race you to the other side."

"Loser gets to ask the other a question. And no cheating, Harry." Harry laughed and nodded. He sprinted to the other side, leaving her behind.

"So what's the question?" Harry asked when she finally made it to the other side.

"How are the nightmares?" Ginny asked softly.

"The same as normal. Last night there was a Revelry so I had to deal with that," he said running his fingers through his hair.

"I'm sorry, Harry," she said lovingly.

"Nothing to worry about. I can deal with it," Harry said trying to sound strong and unaffected by it. However, he knew Ginny saw through it.

"If you say so," she said rolling her eyes at him.

"And what was that look for?" he asked faking anger.

"Just the look any teddy bear deserves when he's acting all macho," she replied with a laugh. Harry shot at her and they spent many long minutes playing tag. Harry felt so happy with her; all their worries seemed to melt away. The last time Harry caught up with her, he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off of her broom. He swung her onto his and he shot at the ground.

"Harry, pull up and let me off!" she yelled at him. When he was level with the ground he touched down and let her off.

"Get on behind me," he asked her. "It'll be more fun." She looked at his face and saw the eager anticipation shining from it. His smile was contagious and she swung her leg over the broom. "Hold on tight!" He shot straight up into the air and he let out a "Whoop!"

He felt her arms tighten around his waist as he went into a vertical dive. She let out a small cry of fear, but it was soon replaced with one of joy. Harry yelled with her and pulled out of the dive. He flew parallel to the ground, their feet skimming the ground. He shot up and did a loop-the-loop. They flew like that together for about half an hour.

What they didn't know was that several people were watching them from the castle. Professor Dumbledore watched the couple through his telescope. There was a huge smile on his face and the twinkle was glittering in his eye.

Thia watched the two with a sad smile on her lips. From her rooms, she could see the black haired boy flying with the red head behind him, her hair loose of its bindings. It was easy to forget the twenty odd years that had gone by and believe that it was James and Lilly flying out there.

Ron watched the two through the omnioculars that Harry had bought him at the Quidditch World Cup. His anger was boiling, but he felt a huge loss. He'd lost his best friend and little sister at the same time. Why had he ever thought the two belonged together? He couldn't believe that they'd desert him like this.

Hermione watched from her own dorm, laughing with delight. Harry deserved to be happy and Ginny was giving him that happiness. Ron would always be the one he got in trouble with. She would always be the one to bail them out, whether it was with her notes or quick lies. But Ginny... Ginny could give Harry so much more. And she knew Ginny would. She knew Ginny and Harry would live happily ever after, because that's the way it was meant to be.

"Mr. Potter, what is that you're reading?" Snape's cold malicious voice asked. Harry looked up startled from the note he was reading. He had received it at breakfast from an owl he didn't know. The envelope had written on it, "Do not open at the table." So Harry had waited until after his Potions test. He couldn't believe what it said and was stunned by it. "It's a note I see. Give it here and let me read it out loud so that everyone can benefit from it."

Harry looked up at the man, defiance written all over his face. There was no way Harry would let the slimy git read this so that everyone could hear it. "No," he said quietly, but somehow everyone heard him.

Snape raised his eyebrow in a question. Usually the idiotic Potter boy gave up the notes willingly. This one must prove the rumors flying about the school. Snape had known that they must be true and now he had the proof.

"And why not, Potter? Something to hide?" he asked with a sneer. Harry thought to himself yes, I have a lot to hide. This thought translated itself into a desperate look, but Snape didn't let his surprise show. Snape had never seen Potter look so vulnerable before.

"No, Professor Snape," he repeated quietly, adding a mocking tone to the "Professor." He didn't want to take any crap from the man. At least, not until he was sure of Snape's allegiances. "It's rather private and I'd rather that everyone not hear it."

"Give it here, Potter," Snape said viciously. Harry glared at him back, determined not to give in. "Potter, writing, passing, and reading notes in class are all against the rules. I must have that note now or I will be forced to take points from Gryffindor."

"You can have the points then, Professor," Harry told him honestly. "I am not giving you this letter."

"That's ten points for your cheek, Potter. Another ten for your insolence. And another twenty for disobeying me. Now, do you want to lose more or would you like to hand me that note right now?" Harry looked around thinking fast. There was no way for him not to give Snape the note. But he really didn't want it read out loud for everyone to hear. "I'm waiting, Potter."

"Please, don't read it out loud," Harry asked softly. Snape misinterpreted this as a plea and smiled victoriously.

"Dear Mr. Potter," Snape started to read, loud enough for everyone to hear him. "Please accept my congratulations for surviving these

past sixteen years. I am more than a little surprised and encouraged by your tenacity. You are a very resilient young man.

“I am at a loss at how to continue our relationship. Up until now, there has been no love lost between us. I have wanted you dead since before your birth, and you have sought revenge for many years. But, I believe it is time for a change.” Snape faltered slightly, but continued reading. It seemed that he didn’t even realize that he was still speaking out loud. Harry felt his head hang in weariness. His life had officially hit rock bottom.

“I extend to you, as I did your first year at Hogwarts, the hand of friendship. As I told you at the time, I believe it possible to bring back your parents. Now, not just them but bring back your Godfather back as well. I believe that between the two of us, we could take over this world. We could rule side by side.

“Just think about it, Harry. Unlimited power, unlimited followers. All the respect you could ever want. No more having fools put you in the spotlight needlessly. No more fools looking to sacrifice you for their cause. You’d be the one in charge, at my side as my second in command.

“Ask around, son, I don’t make this kind of offer often. I have not even asked the son of one of my more devoted followers to join me yet. He would jump at the chance of this offer. Just think, someday you would have power over them both.

“But, I must warn you, Harry. I don’t take rejection very well. If you turn down this offer to greatness, I will take care of everyone you love. Your Godfather died last year because you didn’t cooperate. First, that filthy werewolf and his auror girl will die. Then each of the red headed blood traitors will die. After that, I will hunt down your two friends, the stutterer and the dreamer. They too will die. But after that, Harry, I will find that girl of yours and torture her until you arrive to rescue her. I will make you watch her die.

“Remember my words, Harry, and choose wisely. Lord Voldemort.” There was a stunned silence as everyone turned their attention from Snape to Harry. Harry could feel their eyes on him, but he didn’t look

up from where his head laid on the table. His fingers were clutched in anger and he knew his face had to show it. He didn't want his classmates to see him so out of control. How could Voldemort even think of sending him an invitation to join his ranks?

"So," Snape asked breaking the silence, "how will you reply?"

Harry looked at him and glared at him. How could Snape even doubt his morals? "Let's see," Harry answered sarcastically. He pretended to think hard. "I kind of like this offer. Let me just write the reply right now." He took out a piece of scrap parchment and grabbed Hermione's quill from her fingers. "'Dear Lord Voldemort.' Do you think that's too formal or should I use just Voldemort. Or, how about Voldie, seeing as he wants to be chums with me. No, let's stick to Voldemort." He dipped the quill in ink. "I have just received your note and had it read out loud to my Potions class. I can only think of one response. Go! To! Hell!" He jabbed the quill down hard each time he dotted an exclamation mark. "'Love, Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived.'" Harry paused and glared at Snape.

"Did you really think I'd ignore everything that I believe in, Snape?" Harry asked incredulously. The class was staring at him with their mouths hanging open. Hermione's face held a worried look, Ron was surprised, but Snape kept his face blank. "All year I've told the D.A. that I would die fighting Voldemort for them. Why would I change my tune now?"

"He has threatened everyone you love," Snape said quietly.

"And how is that different from yesterday?" Harry asked very loudly. "Just knowing me puts them in danger, loving me puts them on his 'to do' list. They all know that and they've accepted that risk." Harry stopped glancing at Ron. Was this a reason why he didn't want Ginny dating him? "And even if I did join him, how would that change anything? Tonks would still be an Auror; Remus would still be fighting him. The Weasleys would still be, and I quote, 'blood traitors.' Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, and Ginny were all with me when we humiliated his Death Eaters. He would still want them dead."

“What about the possibility of bring back your lousy parents and that mutt of a Godfather?” Snape asked, clearly having forgotten that the room held other students.

Harry’s eyes glazed over in pain and loss. Everyone saw the look of complete anger and hate be replaced by the hurt and suffering. Snape’s face registered his surprise for a split second. “They’re gone. Nothing I want to dabble in can bring them back. I don’t want to know his plans; that is if he’s telling the truth. It’s probably a lie to make his ugly self look more appealing.”

Snape watched the boy with fascination. “You do know that you’re not the hero, right? It’s not your job to save us all.”

“Who said that?” Harry asked. Everyone thought he meant that he had never thought himself as the hero. But Ron and Hermione could see the brief look pass over his face and knew he was talking about not being the hero. “If you’ll excuse me, I must go send my reply.” Harry got up and was surprised to see the faces of several fifth years, including Ginny’s. He hadn’t realized that the bell had rung.

“Potter,” Snape called out and Harry turned to look at him. “You are not seriously thinking about sending that as your reply?”

“Yes I am. He had no right to send the invitation to me in the first place and I’m going to tell him so.” He looked at the note he had penned. “You know what? You’re right. It’s lacking something. But what?”

“How about tact, Potter?” Snape suggested quietly.

“No, not that. He doesn’t deserve tact. Particularly since he showed none by sending this to me.” He looked at it thoughtfully. “It’s too forceful. Can I borrow a quill and some parchment?” he asked Ron. Ron nodded and handed him it. He wrote something down sloppily taking some time and then headed for the door.

“What did you write?” Snape asked sharply. Harry smiled at him.

"I don't think it's any of your concern, Snape." Harry stared at the man. "But let your mind rest at ease, I'm not joining his ranks. Oh, and if said son of that certain Death Eater wants this offer, all he has to do is ask," Harry said loudly looking directly at Draco.

Harry stormed his way up Professor Dumbledore's steps. They took him up to slowly and he was impatient. He knocked on the door, but didn't wait to be invited in. Harry saw Emmeline Vance sitting in front of his desk, along with Shacklebolt and Mr. Weasley.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Harry said quickly, "but I need to speak with you now."

"I'm rather busy at the moment," Dumbledore said with his normal calm. "If it could wait another half hour?"

"If I leave," Harry answered without stepping down, "I'm going to send Voldemort a note telling him to go to hell. I need you to convince me not to." The three adults looked at Harry surprised. None of them had heard Harry swear before and they had definitely never heard of anyone swearing at Voldemort before.

"And why would you be sending Voldemort that particular note?" Dumbledore asked, the first to recover as always.

"Because of this." Harry handed the headmaster the letter from Voldemort and waited patiently as first Dumbledore, then the Minister, Shacklebolt, and finally Mr. Weasley read it. All three adults stared at Harry, deeply impressed.

"I see," Dumbledore finally said. "Well that changes a few things, now doesn't it?"

"I don't see what it changes," Harry said angrily. "He was already after them and he will continue to be after them even if I joined."

"That is true, Harry," Dumbledore said nodding. "But we were discussing your holiday plans."

"I'm going to spend it with the Weasleys," Harry said stubbornly.

"We do not think that that is the best plan," Dumbledore told Harry patiently. Emmeline was slightly surprised that Dumbledore took such insolence from his students.

"I do," Harry replied with finality in his voice. "I'm not hiding, Professor. I'm going to live my life as much as I can with this... this idiot after me." Dumbledore watched Harry sadly.

"I cannot guarantee your safety there," Dumbledore told him.

"Where's there?" Harry asked.

"If you don't know," Emmeline finally said, "where you're going to spend Christmas, then how can you be so sure about your plans?"

"I don't care where it is," Harry answered her quietly. "For all I care I could spend the entire break at Azkaban with the dementors, just as long as the Weasleys were there with me. I'm not spending it without my family." Harry told the headmaster firmly. Because Harry was staring down Dumbledore, he missed the look of happiness and joy that lit Mr. Weasley's face.

"It was going to be at the Burrow," Dumbledore finally answered. "The house should be finished by then. But this complicates things."

"We'll still take him, Professor," Mr. Weasley said willingly. "We would be more than willing to take him for the break. Our house was already destroyed, with most of our belongings. What more can Voldemort do?"

"Oh, I'm not doubting your willingness, Arthur," Dumbledore told the man. "I'm just hesitant about having all those whom Voldemort wants to use against Harry all in one place at such an obvious time."

"He picked these people," Harry argued quietly, "because they were close to me. You spend the holidays with those closest to yourself. That would be the Weasleys, Remus and Tonks, Thia, and Hermione."

"That is a good point, Harry," Dumbledore conceded. "Are you willing to put them in harm's way?"

"They already know," Harry responded, almost inaudible. "They haven't deserted me yet." Dumbledore looked at Fawkes and thought for a long while. "Headmaster, I promised Mrs. Weasley that I would be at her home for Christmas. I would rather not have her angry with me," Harry added with a smile.

"He's got a point there, Professor," Mr. Weasley told the headmaster with a smile. "Molly would be furious with all of us if Harry didn't spend the holidays with us. And I'm sure Ginny would be just as angry," he added with a laugh. Harry felt his cheeks redden and cursed himself once again for being easily embarrassed.

Dumbledore looked from Harry to Arthur. He seemed to have arrived at a decision. "We'll compromise. I will let you go to the Burrow, only after we have added several precautions and wards. New ones that we didn't have last summer. Maybe even the Fidelius Charm, with myself as the secret keeper. If we cannot get the wards up to my likings you spend Christmas here, but," Dumbledore raised his hand to stop the two men from arguing with him. "But the Weasleys may all stay here, once the students leave."

Harry thought about it for a moment. He knew it was as good as he would get. "Fine, but please try to get all the precautions up. I really want to spend one Christmas at the Burrow." Dumbledore nodded.

"Now, as for your reply to Voldemort," he stopped and smiled. "I must discourage you from giving him that particular note. I would suggest one with more tact."

"That's odd," Harry stated curiously. "That's what Snape---"

"Professor Snape, Harry," Dumbledore corrected quietly.

"That's what Snape," Harry continued as if he hadn't heard the headmaster, "told me when I said I was really going to send it."

"He knows about this?" Shacklebolt asked surprised. He couldn't believe Harry had gone to talk with Snape before Dumbledore.

"Yeah, along with every sixth year in my Potions class and several fifth years," Harry responded bitterly. "Snape thought it was a note, probably thought it was from Gin, and he demanded to read it to everyone. He should have realized I didn't want to give it to him for a reason."

"And they all know?" Dumbledore asked surprised. "Didn't Severus stop once he realized what he held?"

"One would think, but maybe he doesn't really have a brain," Harry said contemptuously. "There sure is a lot of proof against him having one."

"Harry, please respect him," Dumbledore chided gently. "He is your teacher and deserves your respect."

Harry just rolled his eyes. He wasn't going to go into details about why he wasn't happy with Snape at this moment now. "I'm sorry, Professor. I think he didn't realize that he was still speaking out loud at the time. He sure didn't read it before hand."

"Tom will be mad when Harry turns him down," Emmeline said, speaking to Dumbledore. "Harry might as well send whatever message he wants. And it'll worry Tom if he cusses at him like that." Dumbledore looked at her with a slight smile on his lips.

"That is a good point," Dumbledore turned his gaze to Harry. "What exactly were you planning on sending?"

Harry took the note that he had hastily stuffed into his pocket. He smoothed it out and read it out for the three to hear. "'Dear Voldie.' I thought that was a good touch seeing as he wants to be chums with me. Any way. 'Dear Voldie, I have just received your letter of invitation. I must inform you that my whole Potions class was very impressed with it. I must, however, warn you first about what you will be dealing with if I joined you. These are, I believe, the reasons why Dumbledore is so willing to sacrifice me—'"

“Harry, you don’t believe I’m just sacrificing you?” Dumbledore asked hurt.

“No, but Voldemort does and he brought it up. It also fits in with the theme of my note. Anyways, where was I? Oh, here we are.

“First, I play knock and run quiet frequently. As you must know, that game consists of knocking on someone’s door and then running away. After about five minutes you repeat it. It goes on all night and it annoys the crap out of Dumbledore. I’m sure you’ll love it when I play with you.

“Second, I like to make insolent remarks at inopportune times. I’ve already planned some for our meetings with our Death Eaters. After you tell them our plan, I’ll say out loud, ‘As easy as taking candy from a baby,’ but then under my breath but loud enough for all to hear I’ll say, ‘but some of us have problems with that.’

“Third, I insist on tucking Dumbledore in every night, singing him a lullaby, and making sure he has his teddy bear. For some reason I get the impression that he doesn’t like that. I also like to read The Ugly Duckling to him almost every night. I believe it’ll fit in nice with your bedtime also.

“Fourth, I also have found a liking to snake meat. It grosses out Dumbledore and my friends, but I’m sure you enjoy it. I mean you lived on snake venom for a year, didn’t you? And I’m sure your pet snake would make excellent cuts of meat.

“Fifth, I must ask you as I’ve asked Dumbledore a billion times, have you ever had a girlfriend?

“Sixth, I think it would be cute if I was called The Boy Who Lived and you would be called The Seriously Dark Wizard Who Let The Boy Who Lived Live. What do you think? I think it’s a lot better than You-Know-Who. I mean who came up with that nickname, Wormtail? Or maybe Bellatrix? Or even Lucius?

“And lastly, I must inform you that I must turn your wonderful offer down. I have just realized that I have a billion pranks to play on you, and that if I was in close quarters with you every day, I would never get around to conquering the world.

“Yours truly, Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived (The title given to me by the whole world after I beat you as a little child.)

“P.S. Go! To! Hell! Love, H. Potter T.B.W.L. (The Boy Who Lived)”

Mr. Weasley had been laughing through out most of the letter, Emmeline was striving to keep a straight face, Shacklebolt's deep chuckle filled the room, and Harry had noticed that Dumbledore's twinkle had grown in size.

“So can I send it?” Harry asked them warily. He really wanted to. It was about time he actually did something to piss Voldemort off, instead of just living.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said. “But please be aware that it will seriously anger Voldemort and he'll want revenge.”

“What more can he do to me,” Harry started to ask, “than what he's already promised? Killing me afterwards would only make it easier on me.”

“That's true,” Dumbledore remarked sadly. He would always find it sad when a child had to grow up too fast. “Now go on and send it. I wouldn't send an owl you want to see again; Voldemort will probably kill it, if he's given the chance.”

“I think Hedwig can out-smart him,” Harry said confidently. “Thank you for your advice.”

“It was my pleasure, Harry. Now off you go. It is already lunch and we're both late.” Dumbledore rose and said goodbye to Emmeline, Shacklebolt, and Arthur. Harry left and headed to the Great Hall. He wanted Hermione, Ginny, and Ron's advice before he sent it.

"There you are, Harry," Ginny said when he entered the Entrance Hall. She walked over to him hurriedly and wrapped her arm around his waist. Harry's arm automatically found its spot on her shoulder. "Where have you been?"

"Talking with your dad, Emmeline Vance, Kingsley, and Dumbledore about Christmas break and about Voldemort's nerve." They had entered the Great Hall and every eye turned to look at them. It had gotten deathly silent and his last words echoed through out it. Harry rolled his eyes. He had once again been part of a rumor that had beaten the previous record time. "So, every one knows then," he commented loudly. They all looked away embarrassed, but Harry still saw the quick glances shot his way. The noise still hadn't risen and Harry used that to his advantage. "So, Gin, what do you think? Should I tell Voldemort to go to hell or tell Voldemort and all his Death Eaters to go to hell?"

Ginny laughed at him and steered him to an open seat at the end of the table. "I like the sound of the first one. It will make him feel more special. Ron and Hermione went to the Owlery to look for you. They'll be down in a minute." It seemed that the whole Hall was still trying to listen to their conversation.

"So do you think everyone is worried that I'm going to accept Voldemort's offer or do they just want us to confirm the other rumor about us?" Harry asked her loudly. Ginny just rolled her eyes at him and hit him over the head. "What did I do to deserve that? I'm not the one trying to eavesdrop!"

"No, but you're making them feel guilty," she scolded. "Just because you're pissed at Voldemort doesn't mean you get to take it out on them. So what did you write? I personally liked the first draft."

"Read it then," Harry said handing it to her. She read it quickly and was giggling through out it all. "Like it?"

She got to the P.S. and broke out laughing. "Well, Harry, you just proved that you're a Gryffindor through and through. No Slytherin would have the guts to send that to him. He should appreciate the P.S."

"What P.S.?" Hermione asked sitting down next to Ginny. Ron sat next to Harry even though there was an empty seat next to Hermione.

"Read it," Harry told her pointing to the letter. She read it, trying not to smile the whole time. She did let out a laugh when she got to the P.S. "Ron?" he asked holding the letter out to the boy. Ron was laughing the whole time. "Your dad liked it too."

"Can I suggest something?" Ron asked carefully. Harry nodded and Ron continued, "Add something about apparate and run. Remember Fred and George did that to us before last year and how it drove us insane?"

"Ok," Harry said getting a quill out of Ginny's bag and dipping it in ink. "So I'll add that as a star after that paragraph and at the end write, 'And I can't wait 'til I get my apparation license 'cause then I can play apparate and run. Which is very much the same except I apparate into your room. Just think of it. Poof I'm here. Poof I'm gone. Poof I'm here. Poof I'm gone.' What do you think?"

"Perfect," Ron said with a huge smile.

"Harry, you know that's going to piss him off. The last time he was pissed off he killed that person just to amuse himself," Hermione warned him quietly. The silence in the Hall was getting to her too.

"And how would that change things?" Harry asked her instead. "He's already pissed at me. And he's going to get pissier even if all I wrote was 'No!' so I'm going to milk this for all it's worth. Anyways, I should get points for creativity. I don't think anyone's ever turned him down with more class." Ginny and Ron broke out laughing.

"So," the sneering voice of Draco broke into their laughing, "you're going to turn him down and mock him at the same time. I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"No, according to him," Harry told the boy as he stood up, "you'd jump at the chance of being offered that. Is he telling the truth?" Draco just glared at him; he was more than slightly conscious of the hundreds of

watching students and teachers. "I'll just put in a little recommendation. You'll fit right in with the other morons and cowards he employs."

Draco reached for his wand, but Harry was quicker. "I wouldn't take the Mark if I were you," Harry told the boy with his wand at his heart. Draco put his hands at his side and Harry lowered his own wand. "I can't see why anyone would want to serve an abusive lunatic like him. I would think that a person of your aptitude and intelligence would at the very least want to become the next Dark Lord and rival and eventually overthrow Voldemort. At the most you could be a talented Auror or just about anything else. Why it's your goal in life to do exactly what Tom Riddle wants you to do, I don't know? Maybe you just don't quite realize what it means to be a Death Eater. Or maybe you just don't care." Harry turned his back on the stunned boy and sat back down to eat his lunch.

"He'll kill everyone you love and he'll get you, too," Draco said menacingly.

Harry turned to face the boy and yawned. "You know, that threat gets old after sixteen years. As Voldemort was so kind in telling everyone, he's been after me since before I was born. I shiver in my boots with the thought of Voldemort being after me. Now, go back to your table, you're dirtying ours." Draco sneered and walked back to his seat.

"I hope I'm not dirtying it," Blaise said contemptuously.

"Nope, not you," Harry said, scooting down a seat, pushing Ginny and Hermione over a seat and motioning for Blaise to sit. Everyone in the Great Hall stared, shocked at the invitation. Slytherins didn't sit at the Gryffindor table and Gryffindors didn't sit at the Slytherin table. That was an unwritten law that didn't exist with the other houses.

"Thanks," Blaise said sitting down. "What's up with the double standard?"

"There isn't one," Harry responded. "You fight against Voldemort and, at the very least, Draco sympathizes with him. Do you want something?"

"Yeah, can I read that letter," Blaise asked pointing at the piece of paper sitting in front of him.

"Sure, go ahead. It's not like it's a secret." Blaise read it, the corner of his lips turning up in a smile. For Blaise this was like rolling on the floor laughing.

"Ginny's right, you're definitely a Gryffindor. Though I do disagree with the reasoning," he added thoughtfully. "No Slytherin would be stupid enough to send that, only a Gryffindor is."

Harry laughed at this remark and nodded his head. "It's a weird mix of the two really. One half of my head is saying, 'Don't be an idiot and send that,' while the other half is saying, 'What more can I add?'" Blaise's face broke out in a full grin and Harry smiled with him. "It's kind of confusing having them arguing all the time. Maybe I should get other people's opinions. You're first person to answer the 'Should Harry Potter Piss Off Voldemort Poll'? What do you think yes or no?"

"Yes," Blaise said simply. Harry turned the paper over and wrote the title of the poll at the top of the page. He put four columns with the name of each of the houses at the top. Each of those columns he split in half with 'Yes' and 'No.' Under the Slytherin 'Yes' he put a tally.

"So what do you three think?" he asked his best friends and girlfriend. They all nodded and Harry put four tallies down under 'Yes.'

"There's only three of us, Harry," Ron told him quietly.

"And why can't I vote?" Harry asked pretending to be hurt. "It's my poll after all." The bell rang and Harry reached for his bag, which wasn't there.

"You left it in the Potion's dungeon," Ginny whispered in his ear. "Here you go." She handed it to him. "Don't do anything else to piss Voldemort off without consulting me too. I want to participate." Harry wrapped her in a tight hug and leaned his forehead against hers.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he told her quietly. He leaned his mouth next to her ear and whispered, "Do you think making out tonight counts as pissing him off?" Ginny laughed at him.

She pulled his ear down to her mouth and whispered, "Yes, particularly if he didn't have a girlfriend at Hogwarts."

"That's too bad then," Harry said leading her up the stairs towards their next classes. "I was planning on spending the evening with my best mate. Probably getting thoroughly beaten and demolished by his chess team." Ginny laughed at him and smiled.

"At least he's there to beat and demolish you," she added between laughs.

"That is true."

All through the day, Harry asked for people's opinion on the matter. In the Dark Arts class, Thia even allowed Ron to read it out loud. Harry was too shy and couldn't stop laughing long enough to read it. Everyone gave Harry their opinions, particularly since it was an anonymous poll. In the end, the yes's won by a landslide so Harry sent the bent and broken piece of paper off to Voldemort, hoping that Hedwig would return safely. He had felt foolish telling her of the danger, but he knew she could understand him and would be safer with a warning.

That evening, many Gryffindors came up to congratulate him on his wonderful letter and the guts he had in sending it. The D.A. members asked him when the next meeting was and he realized that he hadn't set a date yet.

"Katie!" he yelled over the noise.

"Yeah?" she yelled back from the table she was studying at.

"When are the practices this week?" he asked her, walking over to her.

She thought for a moment and then answered him. "We practice Wednesday. Ravenclaw has the pitch today and Thursday. They wanted two practices because of their game two weeks from last Saturday. Hufflepuff practices Tuesday. Why?"

"Trying to figure out when to have our D.A. meeting, that's why," he answered. He grabbed his galleon out and tapped it with the date for Friday. "Thanks." He headed back to his game of chess against Ron. He lost it spectacularly. He went to bed soon after and slept fitfully.

"Harry," Sephra came up to him at the breakfast table the next day and told him in a no nonsense voice, "We can't have the D.A. meeting Friday."

"And why not?" Harry asked sleepily, but curiously.

"Because I'm holding tryouts for the new Slytherin team," she told him, "and I'm hoping most of the D.A. members will tryout."

"So they did give you guys a team," Harry commented casually. "I'm glad you're the captain."

"Yeah, me too!" Sephra said excitedly. "I tried out for the team in September, but Draco laughed me off the pitch. Now I'm captain and he's facing expulsion. I couldn't be happier."

"He doesn't give you a hard time, does he?" Harry asked her worriedly.

"Nothing, I can't handle," she answered evasively. "So are you going to change the meeting time?"

"Could you have tryouts on Saturday?" Harry asked. He knew that the D.A. members would complain if they met on a Saturday or Sunday.

"No, I need to get approval from Professor McGonagall a week before any practices," she told him, clearly annoyed. "She or Madame Hooch must supervise our practices. If I cancel I can't practice until next Tuesday, but there aren't any days open after Saturday."

“Oh, let me think.” Harry thought about it carefully. For any other team the club would be willing to sacrifice an hour of their weekend, but for the Slytherins? Well, he didn’t care. “Ok, I’ll switch it. Good luck with your team. I wish we could play it.”

“Yeah,” she replied. “Thanks for understanding.”

“No problem, Sephra.”

Chapter Twenty: Going Home for Christmas

At times life is wicked
And I just can't see the light.
A silver lining sometimes isn't enough
To make some wrongs seem right.
Whatever life brings
I've been through everything.
Creed: Don't Stop Dancing

Dark Lord Asks

Harry Potter to Join Him!
By Rita Skeeter

Sources close to this reporter have revealed to her that Mr. Harry Potter, currently a sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, received on the first of December a letter from You-Know-Who. The sources go on to say that Potter was offered the position of You-Know-Who's second-in-command.

This worries me. What sixteen-year-old boy could turn down such an offer of greatness? Can a sixteen-year-old boy see what the implications such an action could entail?

It was reported several years ago that Potter could speak Parseltongue. This is the ability to speak with snakes and is a trait which commonly belongs to Dark Wizards. How does Potter, a half-blood of decent parentage, receive such talent as this?

Many put him up on a pedestal because Potter has survived many meetings with You-Know-Who. What if we are missing a crucial element of the story? Maybe the

one thing that Potter has not told us about his meetings with You-Know-Who is that he was just meeting a friend, who in no way wanted him dead.

How can we be so sure that Harry Potter is on our side? Why would You-Know-Who, an accomplished dark wizard, go after a one-year-old child? Maybe You-Know-Who knew that Harry Potter was the next Dark Lord and wanted to take care of him while he had the chance?

As of this writing, I have not received a report on how Potter responded to this invitation. I worry, though, that this letter was just a formality. I fear that the hand of friendship has already been extended by Voldemort and accepted by Potter. If Potter has truly turned against us, it is the responsibility of Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, to take the boy under his wing and steer him back to the side of Light. If Potter won't return to us, then Dumbledore must allow the Ministry to arrest the boy and force him to face the Mugwump for his crimes against our beloved country.

Harry stared at the page in silence. Right after Sephra left, the owl that delivered Hermione's copy of the Daily Prophet had landed right in front of her. She had let out a small scream and hastily read the article. Harry grabbed it from her when she gave him a worried look.

It was Skeeter again. This was the kind of rubbish he was used to being printed by the Daily Prophet. Her source didn't have any news about his reply. Could that be because they just wanted to get him in trouble?

Harry looked straight ahead, thankful that his back was to the other tables. Hermione and Ron were surprised by the look on his face. They hadn't thought the article would make him as angry as Voldemort's invitation the day before. Harry was fuming. He was learning to fight to the death so that scum like Skeeter could live without Voldemort in her life. He was so against what Voldemort stood for that he had formed his own group to train them how to fight. How could she even think about printing this garbage?

Harry stood up suddenly, feeling the eyes of every student in the Great Hall follow him up to the front table. He held the newspaper in one hand. His other hand was balled up into a fist. Harry hoped no one would get in his way, because he needed to hit something.

"Professor," Harry told the waiting Headmaster when he arrived to the front, "I would like to speak to you about Rita Skeeter." Dumbledore nodded and motioned for Harry to enter the side chamber where he had gone after his name was called for the Triwizard Tournament.

"What would you like to do about this?" Dumbledore asked patiently.

"I want that other reporter, Vachel something," Harry continued, "to write an article refuting this rubbish."

Harry noticed that all the paintings were empty and the door glowed with a slightly red tinge for only a moment. "We now have complete privacy, Harry," Dumbledore explained. "Vachel Mente is a member of the Order. He has written his articles only with approval from me. I believe he'd be more than willing to write this article for you."

"I'd be more than willing to give him an interview," Harry said. "I'd hate it, but if it would help, I'd do it."

"No, no," Dumbledore said shaking his head. "We'll keep this to sources only. What I must ask you is if you had a copy of that letter you sent?" Harry nodded. Dean and Seamus had thought the letter too good of a joke to send off without making a copy. They made him copy the poll as well. "Good. Just leave it lying around sometime and I'm sure it'll make its way into Vachel's hands. And the copy of Voldemort's letter, slightly doctored. We won't print all his threats. I

don't think that would be very wise."

"Well, I'll just drop it now then," Harry responded with a smile. He let go of both letters and watched as they floated to the ground. Both were copies, so Harry didn't mind letting go of them.

"Well, look what I've found," Dumbledore said picking up the letters and feigning surprise. "I'm sure the Prophet would like to print these."

The article ruined Harry's whole day. He tried to stop thinking about what this witch could possibly be up to again. His class work suffered because of his inability to concentrate. He was moody all day and even snapped at Ron during Defense. Harry hoped it wouldn't ruin the friendship they had just managed to fix.

Many of the D.A. members had complained to him about the Saturday meeting, but Harry told them that it was the only day this week that they could have it. They didn't like the answer and left grumbling. Harry didn't care what they thought at the moment. That was the only time and that's when they were going to meet. It wasn't like they had anything important planned for that day.

The training session that night didn't go well either. This ended up just talking to Harry about the invitation and newspaper article. Harry tried to talk with her, but he was distracted and his temper was starting to boil. When the time came for him to leave, he left quickly and headed directly to bed; he didn't want his temper to ruin any of his friendships.

The next day didn't improve for Harry at all. Potions class right before lunch was a strained affair. Both men were angry with the other, and neither would apologize first. Harry tried to pay attention in Care of Magical Creatures class but Jobberknolls (small silent blue birds) were not very interesting to learn about. Hagrid was very unhappy because his big surprise hadn't arrived yet and he had to teach them about animals he considered boring.

Harry's head wasn't in the practice that night. He got hit twice by bludgers and almost got hit four more times. He didn't catch the

snitch once and his temper was boiling over. Harry didn't know why he was so furious; it wasn't as if the article had actually hurt him. Everyone at the school knew where his loyalties lay.

"Harry?" Katie started asking him after the practice in the locker room. She waited until he looked at her. "Are you okay, Harry? You don't look so good."

"I'm fine," he snapped at her. He opened his mouth to apologize, when his scar exploded with pain and instead of the apology a scream came out.

Ron and Ginny ran to his side immediately as he fell and started to convulse. Ginny grabbed his head and held it in her lap, stroking his hair and face. "Help me hold him down," Ron yelled at the others. Natalie and Kirke each grabbed a leg. Katie, Ron, and Sloper tried to hold his chest still. Harry was writhing in agony and screaming for all he was worth.

"So, Mr. Potter," the cold pitiless voice of Voldemort said to Harry, "you decided to turn down my offer of friendship. You should have been the person Rita made you out to be. It would have been safer for your friends."

"I see you didn't take my advice seriously," Harry spat at him.

"Yes, that was most amusing," Voldemort said coldly. "I have never been told to go to hell by anyone still living. However, it is usually the last words of a few Gryffindors. If I'm not very much mistaken, they were your father's last words to me." Harry glared at the man with hatred. Then he let his face clear. Thia had once told him that a straight face could anger an enemy where an angry face would just amuse him.

"Yes, I believe that," Harry answered calmly. "What do you want, Tom?"

"I want you to be absolutely sure about your choice, Potter," Voldemort spat at him. Harry was pleased to see the man's cool had worn away.

"I've never been surer of anything in my life," Harry responded. "Now, if you could tell me how to leave this place, I would very much appreciate it, Tom."

Voldemort laughed and Harry screamed with the pain it caused in his scar. "There's no way for you to leave without my direct approval."

Harry looked around at the room they were in. It was a large white room, with no doors or windows. The light seemed to come directly from the walls themselves. "As much as I would love to stay and chat, Tom," Harry said, pleased to see the look of fury on Voldemort's face, "I really must get back to my Quidditch practice."

"I'm afraid that you're not leaving here anytime soon," Voldemort replied acidly. At that moment a thought occurred to Harry. If this place was Voldemort's making why was it all white? If Voldemort had had a choice in the matter, would he not have made this place dark and creepy?

"I think I can leave whenever I want, Tom," Harry told him. He walked to the walls and searched for a way out. Voldemort laughed at him and Harry's scar burst in pain. Ginny would be angry at him if he ended up in the hospital wing tonight; he had promised to help her with her potions homework. Harry noticed that the walls had flickered with his thought of Ginny. "Goodbye, Tom," Harry said confidently. He thought of Ginny clearly and watched the room fade away.

"Harry?" called the worried voice of Ginny, bringing him back to the land of the living. "Harry, are you alright?" Harry opened his eyes and met the deep brown eyes of Ginny. He smiled but couldn't say anything or even move. He looked down at his body and saw the whole Gryffindor team on his body holding him down.

"Get off," Harry croaked out. This startled them and they jumped off of him. Ron hurriedly left and came back with a cup of water. Ginny helped Harry swallow it. "Thanks."

"What happened, Harry?" Ginny asked caringly.

“Not now,” Harry replied. He felt the blood trickle down his face from his scar. “I wonder if it’s normal for scars to open like this?” Harry asked touching his fingers to the open cut.

Ginny brushed his hand off and gently washed the blood off with a wet towel. Harry winced when the warm water made its way into the cut, but didn’t move away. Her touch was calming and loving. Harry smiled up at her.

When she was done, he looked at Ron and asked, “Would you help her get me up. I want to talk about this with Dumbledore.” Ron nodded and between the two Weasleys Harry stood up. He was ashamed at how much he had to lean on them, but he had no strength to hold himself up.

They made their slow way up to the Headmaster’s office, pausing to give the password and waited for the stairs to take them to the top. Harry knocked and waited for an invitation to enter.

“Come in,” Dumbledore’s voice rang out.

“Hello, Professor Dumbledore,” Harry greeted the man. Three chairs appeared in front of his desk and Ginny and Ron helped Harry into one. Ron took the chair to Harry’s left, but Ginny sat on the armrest of Harry’s chair. She kept her hand on his shoulder, softly stroking it. “Voldemort visited me this evening after Quidditch practice.”

“Was your after-practice speech so boring that it made even you fall asleep?” Dumbledore asked with a smile.

“That’s the thing,” Harry replied with a smile at Dumbledore’s joke, “I wasn’t asleep when he got in.”

“You were never really asleep,” Ginny explained before Dumbledore could say anything. “You were thrashing on the floor with your hands clasped to your forehead. That’s why we were holding you down when you woke up.”

“Could you explain to me what happened?” Dumbledore asked curiously. Harry went through the conversation and described the

room as best as he could. "I see, well," he said slowly. "Harry, as much as you're going to hate it, I need you to start your lessons with Professor Snape again. You need to learn Occulmency."

"No," Harry stated softly, but strongly. "I'm not taking private lessons with him anymore. I will learn from someone else, but not him."

"May I ask why?" Dumbledore replied calmly.

"Bad things happen when we're together," Harry answered. "Isn't there someone else I can learn from? I have enough on my plate at the moment and another lesson would crowd it up more."

"I'll ask Thia if she could add it to your training with her," Dumbledore said after a moments' pause. "I still believe Severus would be the best teacher—"

"No," Harry said, interrupting him.

"Very well," Dumbledore said with a frown. "Is there anything else?" Harry shook his head. "I will speak about this with Thia tonight or tomorrow morning. She'll give you her answer at your training session tomorrow." Harry heard the dismissal and stood up, swaying slightly. Ginny caught him, and with Ron's help they left the office.

Back in the hallway, Ginny stopped and looked Harry in the eyes. "Why did thinking of me get you out of there?" she asked bluntly. Harry looked away. He didn't want to answer that question with Ron standing right there.

"How should I know," Harry replied evasively. "If you want help on that Potions essay, we should hurry up and get to the library."

Thia started training him in Occulmency the next evening. She asked if the training session could go another hour after supper so that they still had enough time to go through dueling. Harry agreed to it, thinking that he'd never have any free time.

She did manage to teach him something that Thursday and Harry couldn't feel Voldemort's anger anymore. He was thankful and happy to be in control of his feelings once more.

The next week passed in a blur of eventfulness and activity. Harry was surprised to look at the calendar that Saturday and realize that it was already December 13. He realized that he hadn't bought one Christmas gift and that there wouldn't be another school trip to Hogsmeade between now and Christmas.

Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione went to the Hufflepuff/ Ravenclaw game that morning. It was a sunny day, but it was icy cold. If there had been clouds in the sky Harry would have expected snow. The game was exciting, but thankfully not long.

Harry spent the rest of the afternoon playing chess with Ron. There was an unspoken agreement between the two boys. Neither spoke about their fight and they got along great. Harry knew that it was only a temporary fix; they would need to talk about it soon. Although he knew this, Harry wasn't going to be the one to bring it back up. He liked having Ron talk to him again and it was a relief to once again have his support.

Ginny sat on the armrest of his chair; it had become her favorite spot to sit. Harry wished he could pull her down into his lap and hold her close, but he knew that would get Ron angry and he didn't quite feel comfortable with doing something like that yet.

After the third game (Harry got creamed in all three) Ginny decided to play. She showed Harry some pointers and Harry learnt a little from her. He thought he would have learnt more from a different teacher, because he kept getting distracted by her beauty.

Harry couldn't figure out what he felt for Ginny. Sometimes he knew it was love, but then they would snap at one another and Harry doubted it. At other times she was his best friend and it felt odd to kiss her after those moments. Sometimes she was his student, like at the D.A. or when he was helping her with homework. Other times she was like a little sister; all he wanted to do was protect her.

But every time he thought about her, he couldn't help but think about how she had rescued him from Voldemort. Did that mean something? Did he really love Ginny? Or was it just some crush that would wear off in a year?

At the moment Harry didn't care whether it was a crush or something more. She was still his girlfriend. He'd figure the rest out later. He thought he should do something with her before the end of term on Wednesday. Maybe spend some time walking around the Lake tonight. He wasn't sure yet.

"Do you think they'd let me go Christmas shopping?" Harry asked out loud.

"Why wouldn't they?" Ron asked, not taking his eyes off the board. Ginny had him in check and he was trying to figure out how to get unchecked.

"Cause, you know," Harry replied vaguely.

"I don't see why not," Hermione said from the chair next to Ron. She was studying her Runes textbook. "With the right precautions it should be alright."

"I hope so," Harry replied.

"Checkmate," Ginny said victoriously. Harry smiled at her and briefly kissed her cheek.

"Good for you," Harry told her happily. "You have no idea what I feel like after being trounced by him every time I play."

"Why do you hope they'll let you go shopping?" Ginny asked.

"I don't have any gifts for anyone," Harry told them. "I didn't realize that the trip in November was the only one we'd get before the break."

"You should ask Dumbledore now," Hermione told him. "That way he'd have enough time to arrange everything."

"That's a good idea," Harry told her. "Gin, do you want to come with me and then go for a walk?"

"Sure," she replied brightly. "Are we going outside or staying inside?"

"Let's go walk around the Lake," Harry told her, smiling.

"Fine by me." She hurried up the stairs and got her cloak. Harry walked slower with Ron at his side.

"Your sister's great," Harry told Ron seriously.

"I know that," Ron said. "Don't hurt her, Harry."

The three days of school ended quickly and Harry packed with the other boys in his dorm for Christmas break. They had gotten the Burrow all set up for Harry's visit and Harry was extremely excited. He had never spent Christmas at the Burrow before and it would be fun to spend it there with Ginny and Ron. Hermione was spending the first part of break with her parents and then, a day or two after Christmas, she would come to the Burrow as well.

The train ride to London was a blast. He and Ron played Exploding Snap most of the way there. Ginny played once in awhile, too. Hermione stayed snuggled up to Ron the whole trip, except when they had to patrol the corridors. She and Ron had just realized that they would be spending a week apart. Harry was glad Ginny wasn't going to go anywhere. He was looking forward to spending time with her, but was a little apprehensive about how the Weasley boys would take it.

"I'm so glad Charlie's coming home for Christmas," Ginny said excitedly during one of the times Ron and Hermione were gone. "I haven't seen him since the First Task two years ago."

"Yeah, neither can I," Harry said sarcastically.

"You don't need to worry about Charlie, Harry," Ginny told him with a laugh. "Bill's the other over-protective one. You should have seen him

when Fred told him about Dean's second girlfriend. If he had known where Dean lived he would have gone over there and beaten the crap out of him."

"Thanks, that's so encouraging, Gin," Harry said pulling her into a hug. "I'm more worried about Ron, though."

"He'll come around," she assured him. "He's already half way there."

"I don't know about that," Harry told her. "When we're alone, there's this uncomfortable silence between us. I'm afraid the argument is right under the surface."

"Don't worry, Ron doesn't have it in him to be angry for long," Ginny replied, hugging him tighter.

"Thanks, Gin."

"For what?"

"For being my girlfriend," he told her honestly.

"Trust me, Harry, it was my pleasure," Ginny said leaning over and kissing him. They were in the middle of a very passionate kiss when a loud, "Ahem!" made them jump apart. Thankfully, it was only Neville and Luna and not Ron.

"Sorry, about interrupting," Neville said with a smile. Harry was impressed with the Neville standing in front of him. He was no longer the scared little boy he had been for years. He had a girlfriend (Luna) and was in the top five or six of most of his classes. And, what Harry thought was the best part about Neville, was that he had turned Draco into a ferret with wiggling ears. "I was wondering if you guys wanted to come over to my place sometime this break. You know, for a day or two."

Ginny and Harry exchanged glances. "We'd have to ask my parents," Ginny finally said. "I think it should be alright. Ron and Hermione are invited too, right?"

"Yeah, they can come over too," Neville said looking around for them. "Where are they?"

"They're on Prefect patrol," Harry answered.

"Oh, I thought Draco and Pansy were patrolling," Neville informed them. "We passed them on our way here." Ginny and Harry glanced at each other and started to laugh.

"They're probably somewhere together," Ginny finally said. "You guys want to sit down?"

"No," Neville said, "I need to speak to one or two other people. When's a good time for you guys to come over?"

"After Christmas," Harry answered, "because Hermione's going home and won't arrive at the Burrow until after the 25th. We think she's coming the 26th, but she might stay home an extra day."

"Ok, well, I'll owl you with the dates," Neville said, shutting the door, as he made his way out with Luna.

"Prefect patrol," Ginny said with a laugh. "I can't believe we fell for that."

"Oh, well," Harry said kissing her cheek briefly. "It gives us time alone." They spent the rest of the time without Hermione and Ron talking about things. Ginny told him about normal Christmases at the Burrow.

"Everyone's going to be there this Christmas," Ginny said excitedly. "It'll be the first time in like nine years."

"Percy's going to be there?" Harry asked confused. The last Harry had heard, Percy was in Azkaban.

A glazed look over came Ginny's face and Harry felt like hitting his head several times. "No, but he doesn't count, remember?"

“Sorry, Gin.” He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “I can be such an idiot sometimes.”

“Thanks for telling us that, Harry,” Hermione said as she entered the compartment. “But we already knew that.”

“Thanks, Hermione,” Harry said sarcastically. “Where were you guys?”

“Patrolling,” Ron answered quickly.

“Sure,” Ginny replied, rolling her eyes. She was rewarded with Ron’s ears turning bright pink.

“We’re almost in London,” Hermione said, rescuing Ron from his embarrassment. “What did you guys do when we were gone?”

“We talked about Christmas,” Ginny answered. “Neville came in to invite us to his house for a day or two later this break. We talked about older brothers and which ones to avoid.” Hermione laughed, but Ron glared at Ginny. Thankfully, before a row could erupt, the train came to a halt in front of King’s Cross Station.

Harry looked out the window and saw every Weasley red head waiting out there except Ron, Ginny, and Percy. He smiled and knew that this was going to be a great Christmas. They levitated their trunks off the train and headed over to the red heads. Harry approached warily; he wasn’t sure about what he should expect from the Weasley boys.

“Hello, Harry,” the familiar voice of Remus interrupted his thoughts. “How are you?”

“Hey, Remus,” Harry replied, thankful for the slight delay of the inevitable. “I’m as good as I was Sunday, if not better.”

“How’d that Potions test you had go?” he asked with a slight smile; Harry had spent most of the training session on Sunday complaining about it.

"It was alright," Harry said with a shrug. "I don't think I got an O on it, but I shouldn't get anything less than an A. I did ace that Dark Arts test though. You should tell your sister that her tests are too easy."

"Just because they're easy for you," Dean said behind him, where he had been talking to his mum and step-dad, "doesn't mean that they're easy for the rest of us. Even with your help Monday night, I struggled through that thing. Hello, Professor Lupin."

"Hello, Dean," Remus said with a smile. "Sent any gum wads at Peeves lately?"

"No, sir. Peeves hasn't done that trick for years," Dean replied with a laugh. "I think he's scared that all the students will shoot it at him."

"Yes, that would deter him," Remus said with a smile. "We have a portkey, Harry, so we need to get going. It was a pleasure seeing you again, Dean."

"You too, Professor," Dean said, shaking his hand. "Oh, and congratulations on your engagement."

"Thank you, but how did you find out?" Remus asked slightly confused.

"I thought we had to leave?" Harry said loudly, glaring at Dean to keep him quiet. Remus nodded and the two walked over to the Weasleys. Ginny and Ron had already gotten hugged by their mum and said hello to each of their brothers. Ron had left to escort Hermione over to her parents. Harry could see him meeting the two muggles by the entrance. Harry was surprised that they had come onto the platform.

"Hello, Harry, dear!" Mrs. Weasley said brightly. "How are you?" She grabbed him in a tight hug and Harry waited to breathe again before answering.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley," he answered when she let go. Ginny snaked her right arm around his waist and Harry's left arm found its accustomed place on her shoulder. "I'm glad it's the break though."

“Harry,” Ginny said turning him to her brothers, “you remember Charlie, right?” Harry nodded and shook his hand. “You know Bill.” Harry took the offered hand and kept Bill from breaking his fingers. Ginny was right, this was the other brother to worry about.

“And I’m Forge,” Fred said shaking Harry’s hand in an exaggerated fashion. “And this is my brother Gred. It’s a pleasure to meet you. We’ve heard so much about you.”

“Like how beautiful your eyes are,” George said dreamily.

“And how strong you are,” Fred went on.

“And how nice you are,” George added right when Fred finished.

“And—“

“I’m going to hex you if you don’t shut it,” Ginny said irritably.

“It’s nice to meet your boyfriend, Ginny,” Fred said innocently. Harry felt his face tinge with red. This couldn’t be good. “It’s not like he takes you out on dates to our shop every chance he gets.” Ginny pulled out her wand and Fred shut up rather quickly.

“Ginny,” Molly Weasley scolded gently; Harry watched as the other boys rolled their eyes, “put the wand away.” Harry guessed that if it had been one of the boys who had pulled out their wand, they would have gotten a yelling to rival all yellings.

“It’s almost time to go,” Remus said checking his watch. “Where’s Ron?”

“Over there,” Harry said pointing him out. “Should I go get him?” Remus nodded and Harry and Ginny walked over to them. Hermione had to introduce them and they got all the pleasantries out of the way. “Ron, we need to go,” Harry told him. “The portkey leaves soon.”

“Ok,” Ron hugged Hermione and whispered something in her ear. “See you after Christmas.”

"Bye, Harry, Ginny. See you all in a week." Harry said goodbye and the two Weasleys and Harry headed back over to the Clan.

"Grab hold of this," Remus said, holding out an old trainer.

"You couldn't find something that smelled a little less?" George complained loudly. There were a few laughs and then the familiar tug behind his navel came and he found himself on the ground with Ginny on top of him.

He smiled at her, embarrassed, but nearly jumped when he heard a loud growl come from right above them. Ginny nearly flew to her feet and Harry followed her. Bill, Charlie, and Ron were staring daggers at them both.

"Let's get everyone inside," Remus intervened in Harry's favor. "Tonks is already here." Bill and Charlie pushed past Harry, Ron completely ignored him, and the twins were trying to control their laughter.

"So I only have to worry about Bill, huh?" Harry asked Ginny sarcastically.

"Yep," she said brightly levitating her trunk into the house.

Chapter Twenty-One: His Family

When you are with me
I'm free... I'm careless... I believe...
Above all others we'll fly
Creed: My Sacrifice

It took almost half an hour to get everyone settled in. Harry was surprised to learn that Remus and Tonks were staying for the break too. That is, he was until Fred told him that it was so that they could watch over Harry. The weirdest part of the chaos was that only three people had arrived. Charlie, Remus, and Tonks had arrived the day before and were all settled in. And there was only one new guest, Harry.

When the chaos subsided, Harry went downstairs with Ron to play some chess. He knew that he'd lose, but it was one of the few things he and Ron could do without getting angry at one another. Remus was sitting on the couch by the fireplace with Tonks. They were talking with Bill and Charlie across from them. Harry smiled at them in greeting and sat at the chess table in the corner.

Throughout the game Harry felt the oldest two Weasley boys' eyes on him. Harry wondered why they were all so apprehensive about Ginny and him. The only brothers who took it in stride were the twins, but Harry wasn't even sure about that.

Time passed and Harry had started a second game with Ron. Ginny entered the room and sat next to Tonks; she was now talking with her two brothers. Harry loved the way they teased one another and the way Ginny usually won.

"Harry, it's your turn," Ron said irate. "Stop goggling my sister and move." Harry's cheeks were tinged red as he moved his knight. Ron proceeded to capture it with a pawn.

"You're hopeless at chess," Remus commented from his spot.

"Thanks," Harry mumbled. "You wouldn't help me would you?"

"No," Remus said with a laugh. "Experience is the best teacher."

"Yeah, well you'd think I'd win more often then," Harry grumbled. "I've played countless games and have probably lost 98 of them. And that 2, well, I have a feeling that they let me win." Bill, Charlie, and Tonks joined in with Ron's and Remus' laughing.

Ginny smiled at him and nodded. "You better believe we let you win, Harry. You'd think you'd pay the favor back and let us win a duel or two."

"I'd have to dumb it down so far," Harry replied in turn, "that it would be stupid."

"And the games you win aren't?" Harry smiled at her and laughed. He rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the board. There had to be some trick to this game. "Here, I'll help." She got up and walked over to Harry's chair. She took her accustomed spot on its armrest and put her arm around his head and shoulder.

Between Harry and Ginny (though it was mostly Ginny) Ron was defeated. Bill asked if he could play against Ron; Harry nodded and got up. Ginny led him to the couch and they sat next to Charlie.

"Is Thia coming?" Harry asked Remus when the conversation came to an end.

"Yeah, but she's not staying here," Remus answered cheerily. Harry was glad Tonks had made him so carefree. It almost seemed as if some of his grey hair was replaced by brown hair. "She'll be coming on your trip to Hogsmeade. That should be a fun trip."

"When are we going?" Ginny asked. She was holding Harry's hand and she kept running her finger up and down his palm. They weren't snuggling as they normally would. Harry was too conscious of the three brothers in the room to hold her close.

"Tomorrow," Tonks added brightly. "Who do you need to shop for, Harry?"

"Everyone," he said, but changed his mind. "Well, I think I have Ginny's gift already, but I'm not sure. Why?"

"Well, we need to figure out the schedules," Charlie answered. "If you can't have your friends with you when you shop, that means we'll need a second guard or even a third if they need to split too."

"What happens if I want to buy something for a person in my guard?" Harry asked trying to stump them.

"Just tell one of the others and we'll distract them," Tonks added with a laugh.

"Then why can't you do that with my friends?" Harry asked.

"Good point," Remus said thoughtfully. "Ron, do you need to shop?"

"No, Hermione knew it would be the only chance we'd get to shop," Ron answered as Bill's castle took out his right side bishop. "So we bought our stuff then."

"What about your gift for her?" Bill asked as Ron's knight took out the offending castle.

"Bought it when her back was turned," Ron said waiting patiently for his turn.

"So she knows what it is," Charlie stated. Ron shook his head and moved one of his pawns forward.

"No, she doesn't," Ron replied. "She thinks I bought her a book."

"And what did you buy her?" Ginny asked curiously. She tried to get Harry to snuggle but he tensed up. There was no way he'd do anything to piss off these brothers.

"Like I'd tell you, Ginny," Ron said scornfully. "You'd tell her in a heartbeat."

"I would not," Ginny replied, sticking out her tongue.

"Yes, you would," Harry added with a smile. "You told her both of our birthday gifts for her back in September."

"Whose side are you on anyways?" Ginny asked him angrily.

"The side of Truth, Gin," Harry replied with a laugh. "I can't help it if you can't keep a secret from Hermione and she can't keep a secret from you." She hit him hard in the chest and then kissed him.

"Oy, Ginny, you're blinding us!" Fred said walking in. Harry tried to break away, but she wasn't going to let him get away with it.

"Ginny," Bill said quickly and calmly, "the room is filled with your brothers. Let him go." Harry surrendered to the kiss deciding that he might as well turn this punishment against her.

"Some way to punish him," Charlie muttered angrily. "If only my girlfriend saw snogging as a punishment."

"It is with a room filled of brothers," George said menacingly. The kiss had deepened and both Ginny and Harry had forgotten about the room filled of people. The brothers started to get really angry with the two. All Bill could think of was if this is what they did in a room filled with Ginny's brothers, what did they do alone?

"See what I mean?" Ron said pointing at the two. "Disgusting."

Remus laughed at the brothers and this brought Harry and Ginny up for air. They smiled shakily at the brothers, both blushing furiously. Ginny hadn't meant it to go that far and Harry sure hadn't either.

"I'm going to bed," Ginny said quickly jumping up and heading for the stairs. "Night Ron, Fred, George, Charlie, Bill, Remus, Tonks, and Harry. See you all in the morning."

Harry gulped and muttered, "Thanks, just leave me to fend for myself."

Tonks took one look at the guys in the room and laughed. "I'm glad I don't have brothers. Gees, if this is what they're like..." She shook her head. "Why, I'd never be able to do this." She leaned over and started to kiss Remus. Their kiss rivaled the one just shared between Harry and Ginny.

"I did not need to see that," George said leaving the room quickly. Harry had to agree and fled the room while Tonks and Remus distracted the other brothers. He climbed the stairs and found Ginny laughing on the landing.

"Thanks, Gin," he said when he caught up to her.

"You're still alive," she mumbled quietly.

"Yeah, only because Tonks started snogging Remus," he said, thoroughly grossed out. "I fled under cover of that distraction." She smiled at him.

"Well, it's a good way to let my brothers know that we aren't afraid of them."

"I don't know," Harry said skeptically. "You fleeing right away might have sent the wrong message." Ginny laughed.

"Sorry 'bout that," Ginny apologized. "I didn't mean to make it last so long. I just wanted to snuggle."

"I don't know if your brothers want to see anyone snuggling with you who isn't directly related to you," Harry told her truthfully,

"And I don't care," she said putting her hands on her hips. "They're going to need to get used to it. If it's not you, it'll be some other guy."

"Already planning your next boyfriend, Gin?" Harry asked trapping her against the wall with his arms and body.

"And if I am?" she asked defiantly.

“I’ll have to make sure you don’t live long enough to have one,” he said capturing her lips with his. They broke breathless and smiled at one another.

“Hm,” Ginny said pretending to thing hard. “I think you’ll last a little longer.”

“Could you get out of the way?” George said sternly. Behind him were Fred, Bill, Charlie, and Ron. “Some of us would appreciate washing our hands before supper.” Harry jumped away from Ginny and bounded up the stairs. He knew he was in hot water now.

The door to Ron’s room slammed opened and all of the brothers entered in. Harry swallowed a gulp, but did glance briefly at the window, hoping for a way out. They filed in and shut the door behind them. Each one cracked their knuckles and Harry thought briefly about yelling for help. He knew it’d never come in time.

“We all like you, Harry,” Charlie started quietly. “We really do.”

“But we’d rather not watch you two snog,” George said angrily.

“And if you do just one thing that’s inappropriate with our sister,” Bill added.

“You can expect this,” Fred said pretending to slice his neck with his finger.

“Don’t let us catch you snogging her senseless again,” George said cheerfully; Harry knew it was strained. He had sounded too angry before to be over it so quickly.

“I told you, Harry,” Ron scolded, “that Ginny was my concern. Well, she’s all of ours.” Ron pointed to each of his brothers.

“And she’s my girlfriend,” Harry finally said.

“Is that all she is to you?” Charlie asked waspishly. “Just your girlfriend?”

"No!" Harry replied angrily. "You guys can back off, alright. You might be worried for your little sister, but I'm not out to shag her and then leave her. She's too special to do that to."

"So if she was some other girl?" Bill asked advancing on Harry.

"No!" Harry answered angrily. Harry couldn't believe he was about to say what he was about to say. "You guys can back off. I think I love your sister and I think she loves me! Back off and let us figure it out!"

The five brothers stared at Harry stunned; they hadn't expected that. "Y-you I-love her?" Ron asked stuttering.

"I'm not sure, alright," Harry said running his fingers through his hair. "I don't really know what love is, well, besides friendship. So I'm kind of lost on this one."

Ron sat down hard on his bed; Bill joined him. The twins didn't even make it to a bed; they just sat down where they were standing. Charlie was the only one still up.

"What's so hard about that?" he asked incredulously. "You either love her or you don't."

Harry just stared at him blankly. It was obvious that this was the one Weasley that didn't know him. "That's the problem. I have nothing to base it on," he said quietly. "I didn't grow up in the most loved filled house. I only know about friendship because of Ron and Hermione."

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" Ron asked amazed.

"Let's see, there are several reasons," Harry said looking at Ron with surprise. "Maybe it was because we couldn't talk about Ginny without fighting. Maybe it was because you thought I had slept with her. Maybe it was because it was hard enough admitting to her that I had no idea what I felt for her that I didn't want to tell you. Or maybe it was because you're her brother and wouldn't think about it from a best friend's point of view."

"You told Ginny?" Fred asked stunned.

"I had to tell her the truth," Harry said shrugging. "And it wasn't all that hard, she's easy to talk to." Harry watched as the five brothers laughed.

"You'd be the only one to say that," George said from the floor.

"Ginny would as soon hex you as look at you," Fred laughed.

"Could it be because you guys tease her about being a girl and then suffocate her with your older brother protect-fullness," Harry told them seriously. "You've spent years teasing her for liking things girls like and then teasing her when she tries to be one of the guys. Then you hover around her like she's some porcelain doll."

"She's said that?" Bill asked from the bed across from Harry.

"Not in those word, but yes," Harry answered truthfully. "She loves you guys, but you won't let her be who she is. She's the kind of girl to get her boyfriend in trouble with her five older brothers and then run to her room and laugh. Or, she's probably eavesdropping right now. She's the kind of girl who wants someone to hold her right hand during a fight, but still let her use her wand in her left. She wants to play Quidditch with you guys and beat you at chess, but you won't let her or tease her when she wins. Just let her be."

"Merlin, she got lucky finding you, Harry," Charlie said from where he stood. "None of her other boyfriends stood up to one of us, let alone all of us. And you understand her better than we do."

"Just don't let her blow you up," Ron informed him sagely.

"Nah, she can blow me up," Harry said with a vicious smile.

"Why?" George asked him warily.

"'Cause when she's deflated me, she'll be so sorry that she'll make it up to me," he told them with a laugh. "She hates losing her temper, so she'll make it up to me just to apologize."

"I'm guessing I don't want to know how," Bill whispered.

"No, I'm thinking not," Harry replied with a smile. He got up shooed the twins quietly away from the door and opened it quickly. Ginny fell into his outstretched arms. "I'm alive," he told her.

"I can see that," she said with a smile. There were tears on her face.

"So that's why I didn't hear you run down the stairs," he said softly, wiping the tears off her face.

"You didn't know I was out there!" she informed him forcefully. He smiled at her and hugged her.

"Oh yes I did," he whispered in her hair. "You'd never miss a chance of hearing your brothers get yelled at. And I heard you laugh when I said I wasn't out to shag you."

Her smile brightened her face and she leaned up and kissed both his cheeks. "You're a sweetheart, you know that?"

"No, I think I need to prove it," Harry replied glancing warily at her brothers. "But I don't need to piss them off, so let's go to your room to make out."

"Can't," Ginny replied quickly and with a huge smile.

"And why not?" Harry asked confused.

"Tonks and I are sharing it," she said, as if that explained everything. When the boys in the room gave her blank looks she rolled her eyes. "Tonks and Remus are using it at the moment. Which is why I came up here to check up on you."

"I did not need that visual," Fred commented dryly.

"It's almost as bad as watching some punk manhandle our sister," George said with a smile at Harry.

“Okay, this punk is going to borrow your room,” Harry said evenly to George. “He feels like he needs to manhandle your sister, seeing as her loving brothers made her cry.”

Harry grabbed her hand and led her down the stairs. “Oh no you don’t Mr. Harry James Potter! Don’t you dare use my room! Go into the living room, we’ll stand guard.”

“Isn’t that sweet of your brothers,” Harry whispered to her. “I was only teasing them. I was planning to ask your mum if supper was ready yet.”

Ginny smiled at him and laughed. She bounded ahead of him and dragged him into the kitchen. “Hey, mum,” she said letting go of Harry’s hand and hugging her mum.

“Hi, Ginny, Harry. Can I help you?” she asked, brushing flour off her hands.

“We were wondering when supper is?” Ginny asked brightly.

“Soon,” she answered. “Why don’t you set the table?”

“Okay, mum.” She ran forward and grabbed some plates. She nearly ran from the room into the dining room.

“What’s gotten into her?” Mrs. Weasley asked Harry.

“Would me yelling at her brothers and winning a fight without resorting to magic make her giddy?” Harry asked, grabbing a handful of cutlery.

“Yes, I suppose that would,” she replied with a smile on her face. “I was wondering where everyone had gone. You survived that, did you?”

“Yes and I think I won,” he said heading out of the kitchen and into the dining room. He and Ginny flirted with one another as they set the table.

Hearing them laugh brought a smile to Molly's face. Arthur came inside from the garden. "What has you so happy?" he asked his wife, surprised. She held her finger to her mouth and motioned to the dining room. He heard the voice of his youngest daughter teasing Harry about something. He smiled as he heard Harry respond in like. "Reminds me of this couple I once knew," he said walking over to hug his wife of thirty years. "Happy Anniversary."

She smiled at her husband and replied, "I was wondering if you had forgotten." She laughed as he hugged her.

"Ew, disgusting," Fred said walking in. "First it's Harry and Ginny."

"Then it's Tonks and Remus," George complained.

"Then it was Harry and Ginny, again," Fred continued.

"Then Tonks and Remus, as we were walking down the stairs," George said with a shudder.

"Now it's you two," Fred motioned to his parents.

"Yeah, well," Ron said from the dining room entrance, "don't go into the dining room. It's Harry and Ginny again."

The brothers exchanged a huge grin and went running and screaming into the room. Harry and Ginny jumped apart, Harry pulling out his wand by instinct. He was tempted to curse the smiles off their faces, but put it away. He smiled at them and pulled Ginny into another kiss. He got five loud groans of disgust from them and then he pulled away. Ginny glared at him, putting her hands on her hips.

"Oh, sure, just use me to get back at my brothers." Ginny said angrily. The effect was ruined as her voice broke. All six of the boys laughed.

"Nah," Harry replied. "I was just finishing up what they had so rudely interrupted. That was your idea after all." Ginny blushed and Harry squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Not that I minded all that much."

“Would one of you go get Remus and Tonks?” Mrs. Weasley asked from the entrance.

“Nope.”

“No way!”

“Not it!”

“I ain’t getting them.”

“Not for all the galleons in the world.”

“Harry will,” Ginny said with her sweetest voice.

“Thank you, Harry.” Harry glared at Ginny when Mrs. Weasley had turned her back. All Ginny did was stick her tongue out at him. He grabbed it with his fingers before she pulled it out of harm’s way.

“Don’t stick this out at me again,” he whispered to her. “I wouldn’t want to cut it off.” All her brothers were laughing and Harry knew that they had accepted him, not just as a brother but also as Ginny’s boyfriend. He let go of it and turned to leave. “Put that tongue back in your mouth, Gin.”

After dinner that night everyone went to sit in the living room. Ron proceeded to play chess with his dad. Bill and Charlie were discussing dragons in Romania. Fred, George, Remus, and Tonks were laughing quietly in a corner. Harry was sitting next to Ginny as she talked to her mother.

Harry had never felt such a part of a family before. Sure, he had thought of these people as his family for years now, but he had never been so included before. He was teased as much as any of the others and gave it as good as he got. The brothers weren’t all that comfortable with the couple, but they didn’t stare at them disapprovingly. Harry felt Ginny snuggle in closer and he looked down at her.

Maybe he was really in love with her. Could he have possibly fallen for her completely? How could he tell though? He watched Remus and Tonks out the corner of his eye. They teased each other and Tonks kept changing her appearance to make him laugh. Harry would do anything to hear Ginny laugh, but he liked the way she yelled too.

Mrs. Weasley left to finish the dishes. Harry looked down at Ginny. She was almost asleep, but was watching her dad beat Ron at chess. Mr. Weasley got up and followed his wife into the kitchen. Harry glanced at his wonderful girlfriend. Ginny looked too peaceful to be allowed. He tickled her side ever so slightly and smiled at the glare she gave him

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Don’t do that!” she whispered angrily.

“Don’t do what?”

“Tickle me,” she said angrily.

“All right, if I must.” He tickled her until she laughed continually. She squirmed away, but Harry held her with one of his arms. She was laughing so hard that she was having a hard time breathing.

“Stop it, Harry,” she managed to get out.

“Okay,” he said letting go. She launched herself at him. She had found out that he was just as ticklish as she was. She started to tickle him mercilessly. Harry let her; otherwise she’d pout. He laughed and pretended to make her stop. Finally, he said firmly, “Stop, Gin.”

“Kay” she said, stopping. They looked around at the room in general. Everyone was laughing at them. “What?” Ginny asked them loudly.

“Nothing,” Fred said wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

“What?” Harry asked even louder.

“Later, Harry,” Ron said cracking up again.

"If you don't tell me, Bill," Ginny said pointing her wand at her nearest brother, "I'm going to hex you."

Bill eyed her wand wearily. "Fine," he said. "Put the wand away first." Ginny put it down and Bill continued to watch it. "Remus had just predicted that Harry would tickle you, then he did. He said your whole conversation with you. Then he told us that Harry would let Ginny tickle him in return."

"By the way," Remus said lightly. "If Harry's as ticklish as James was, he should be ticklish on his knees too. And don't ever give him a foot message. Sirius had tried once, trying to get James to blush," Remus rolled his eyes. "He got his face kicked and he spent a week in the hospital wing, trying to live it down."

Harry groaned. He was hoping that Ginny wouldn't learn about how ticklish his knees were.

"Aren't you glad you asked?" Fred asked brightly.

"Yeah," Harry mumbled. Ginny laughed at him and ran her fingers across his knee in as an experiment. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Gin."

"And why not?" she replied as she did it again.

"This is why," he said grabbing her around the waist and tickling her. He wouldn't let her go and he was too strong for her to break away from him. She was laughing so hard and loudly, that no one heard the knock on the door. Harry let go of her when she let her feet fall from under her and her shirt hadn't gone with the rest of her.

She stood up triumphantly, pulling her shirt back down, and laughed at Harry's blushing face. She opened her mouth to say something, when they heard the knock at the door. Instead of yelling at Harry, she said, "I'll get it."

Bill followed her out to the front door, his hand on his wand. Harry walked past him and stood behind her protectively, his hand also on

his wand. Ginny opened the door and caught the girl leaning against it. "Sephra!" Ginny exclaimed in surprise. Harry helped her carry the bruised and battered girl into the living room. Remus took one look at her and left the room. Harry heard him floo to Hogwarts. Mrs. Weasley shooed the boys out and started cleaning her up.

They went into the kitchen and sat around the table. "If Malfoy did that to her," Ron said growling.

"Who is she?" Bill asked confused.

"Sephra Carrigan," Harry saw the look of recognition on his face, but continued for Charlie. "She's Lucius Malfoy's niece. Voldemort killed her parents over the summer and she had to move into Malfoy Manor."

"But isn't Lucius in Azkaban?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah, but his rotten-no-good-wants-to-be-a-Death-Eater-of-a-son isn't," Ron replied acidly.

"As you can see, there is no love loss between the two," Fred informed Bill and Charlie.

"Yeah, he had his Quidditch team try to kill mine," Harry replied coldly. "So he deserves everything he gets."

The fire burned green and Madame Pomfrey stepped into the room. "Where is the girl?" she asked curtly. Harry got up and showed her into the living room. He left quickly, because Mrs. Weasley had peeled away the tatters that were her shirt.

"Is she alright?" Ron asked worriedly.

"One would think she's your girlfriend on the side," George commented dryly. Ron took a swing at him, but George easily dodged it.

"That's enough, boys," Mr. Weasley said tiredly from his chair.

"Sephra's a friend," Harry told everyone. "She was made Slytherin Quidditch captain after Malfoy lost it."

"So there's a Slytherin in my living room," Fred said disgustedly.

"And if you have a problem with it," Ron said threateningly, "you can leave." Harry smiled at him. Who would have thought that Ron would defend a Slytherin? Fred stayed where he was.

The time passed slowly. Sometimes Ginny would come in with bloody water and exchange it for clean, warm water. She wouldn't speak, but just concentrated on getting the water back quickly. Harry hoped Sephra would be all right. He didn't want to put her picture up on the Wall once school started.

Madame Pomfrey finally came into the kitchen, but she wouldn't answer any questions. Everyone could tell that she was worried. Harry hoped that that was just her normal pessimistic streak and that Sephra was just fine. She left by floo only to return fifteen minutes later with a basketful of potions and salves.

"Carry these," she said to Harry, shoving the basket into his arms. Harry followed her into the room and was relieved to see that they had put a shirt on her. "You can go now," she said sharply and Harry left with one worried glance at Ginny.

"She's alive," Harry said to Ron's unasked question. "She doesn't look so good."

An hour later, Madame Pomfrey left for the night, promising to return in the morning to check up on her. They had moved her up to Ginny and Tonks' room and she was sleeping soundly on the bed that had been conjured there.

"How is she?" Harry whispered into Ginny's hair later.

"She'll live," Ginny replied. "I couldn't believe how many cuts she had. She was so bruised." Ginny turned her head into his chest and started to cry. Harry held her, trying to comfort her. He saw the quick look of jealousy on Ron's face before it disappeared. He remembered

his talk with Remus and knew that he and Ron needed to have a heart to heart talk about Ginny and his relationship.

When she had finished crying, Harry led her up to her room and kissed her gently goodnight at her door. Harry hoped that Sephra would get better soon; even soon enough to go to Hogsmeade with them tomorrow.

"Morning, sleepyheads," Ginny said from the door. She walked over and opened the curtains. Morning light filtered into the room, causing Ron and Harry to groan. "Breakfast is ready and the portkey to Hogsmeade leaves in an hour." She shut the door and Harry listened to her jump down the stairs.

"I'm guessing that Sephra's gonna live," Harry said getting up stiffly.

"I'd guess so too," Ron said yawning. They got dressed and headed down for breakfast. They were the last up and Harry saw Sephra sitting stiffly at the kitchen table. Harry walked around the table and took the empty spot next to Ginny. He leaned forward and greeted Sephra on the other side. She smiled at him and went back to her breakfast.

The time right before they left was a study in controlled chaos. Everyone had forgotten something and needed to run and get it. It caused for many slight accidents on the stairs. One time, as Harry was rushing down the stairs without looking, he ran into Sephra. He saw her wince more than need be for the minor run in. Harry guessed she was still sore and bruised.

They arrived at the stile where Harry had met Padfoot fourth year. He frowned slightly and only Ron understood why.

"I still can't believe he ate rats for you, mate," Ron said punching Harry's shoulder. Harry forced a smile, but everyone could tell that it was forced. It was decided that the four oldest Weasley boys, Shackbolt, and Moody would escort Ginny and Harry.

“So we’ll meet back at the Three Broomsticks at eleven,” Thia said checking her watch, “and the young ones can spend the afternoon together.” Ron and Ginny scowled at her, but Harry just laughed. He was used to Thia’s teasing. She just wanted a rise from them.

They shopped for an hour finding little or nothing. Harry was tempted to buy Hermione the book *When Studying Is Bad For You* by Floha Ignavious. Ginny convinced him not to and he hadn’t seen anything else for her. He bought Thia’s gift in Zonko’s, much to the chagrin of the Weasley twins. Harry apologized, but they didn’t care.

“Seriously, Harry,” Fred informed him. “You’re a major share holder in the company.”

“By buying Zonko’s stuff,” George told him, “you’ll put us out of business.”

“Oh, well,” Harry said shrugging. The twins tried to attack him, but Shacklebolt and Bill stopped them.

“Okay,” Shacklebolt scolded them quietly. “If you guys can’t behave yourselves, go.”

“Yeah,” Harry said with a smile. “You mustn’t attack the person you’re guarding from outside attacks.” The twins redoubled their efforts to get at Harry, but Ginny pulled out her wand and toyed with it. Harry loved the effect this had on her brothers. Every last one of them, even Charlie who had only heard of Ginny’s hexing ability, watched it wearily. The twins fell slack in their captors’ arms and gave up.

Harry was just as lost at what to buy Ron as he was with Hermione. He could get him the obvious gift of Chudley stuff, but that was too easy. What was something he had always wanted?

They entered the last shop on the street and looked around. Harry had never been in this shop before. It reminded him of a muggle drug store. It had a little of everything, but nothing at all. The only difference was that this stuff was well made and expensive compared to the junk in a normal muggle drug store.

Harry and Ginny went down just about every aisle looking at the merchandise. Their guard pretended to look at stuff in nearby aisles or by the door. At the jewelry section Harry stopped. There was a best friend necklace in there that he liked. It was different than most best friend necklaces. It was made of three circles that interlocked when together or hung separately.

"What do think of that, Gin?" Harry asked his girlfriend who was looking at rings.

"It's nice, only Ron'll never where that chain." Harry had to agree, the chain was kind of girly.

"What if I bought a chain like that?" he asked pointing at a thicker, darker chain.

"He'll wear that," Ginny said, still engrossed by the rings.

"Find something you liked?" the store employee asked Ginny.

"Yeah," Harry said taking the attention from Ginny. "Could I have that necklace and two of those chains?"

"You sure may, son," the witch replied and slid the objects in question out. She started to package the necklaces and chains. "It's not often you'll find guys willing to wear necklaces," she commented. Harry smiled and fingered the leather around his throat.

"Yeah," he replied, "but see, my girlfriend would kill me if I didn't wear it." Ginny hit him hard in the stomach and Harry doubled over. "See what I mean?" He smiled at her lovingly and grabbed her arm before she could attack. The witch smiled at them and finished with the boxes.

"Would you like this gift wrapped?" she asked. Harry shook his head no. "Well, is this it?"

"For now, but we're not done shopping," Harry told her, grabbing the boxes she handed him. When she left, Harry turned back to Ginny. "What are you looking at, Gin?"

She pointed to a ring near the back of the display. "Isn't that pretty?" Harry looked at it and was surprised to see that it was the same ring his dad had given his mum.

"Yeah," he said pulling her gently away. "I still need a gift for Remus and Tonks. It needs to be a gag gift though, like Thia's."

"Why?" Ginny asked looking around at the stuffed animals.

"Because that's what they deserve," Harry said glancing around for her brothers. "I want to get Bill and Charlie something. 'Cause they're letting me date you."

Ginny laughed and pulled down a stuffed Hungarian Horntail. It was a realistic looking dragon and Harry smiled. "Charlie collects anything dragon. Even stuffed animals like this. Say you're buying it for me and I'll carry it around all day to make him believe it. As for Bill? I'm not sure."

They walked down the aisle of books and Harry glanced at the titles. How to Charm Your Crush. Which Hex Should You Use on Your Ex. Magic for Children Care. Marriage for Dummies. This last one was a muggle book.

"What's that doing here?" Harry asked Ginny pointing at the book.

"I don't know, but it'd make a good gift for Tonks and Remus." Harry laughed and grabbed it off the shelf. "Who do you have left?"

"Bill, your mum and dad," he said thinking about everyone he wanted to buy gifts.

After ten more minutes of looking they were done. They hadn't found anything for Bill or the Weasley parents. Harry was at a loss as to what to get them all. They went to the Quidditch supply shop and looked around. There was a book about British Quidditch teams and their histories. Ginny pointed to it and told him, "Bill's a huge Quidditch historian. He'd like that."

He nodded and grabbed it from the shelf. They winded their way through the store heading for the check out counter. They passed a rack of snitches and Harry looked at them longingly. "I've always wanted my own snitch."

"Well, maybe you'll get it for Christmas," Ginny told him. He laughed at her and paid for the book.

"What about your mum and dad?" Harry asked her quietly. Ginny just shrugged.

"We usually make them something," she told him.

"One year we made her a megaphone," Fred told him.

"Mum didn't like that though," George said shaking his head. "We thought we were being thoughtful."

"Yeah, she wouldn't need to raise her voice at us," Fred said with a laugh. "It was saving her voice."

"She might have liked it better," Charlie said with a laugh, "if it hadn't changed her voice to a squeak and her lecture to an ode to your nose hairs." Everyone laughed, the Weasleys at the good memory and the others at the thought of Mrs. Weasley singing a song about Fred's nose hairs in a squeaky voice.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Fred said with a shrug.

"What else have you guys made?" Harry asked curiously.

"I've sent mum some stuff I find in the pyramids," Bill said thoughtfully. "Things that Egyptian queens used to wear. I'd come up with some story to go along with it, loosely based on truth."

"I make mum a photo album each year," Charlie said, "detailing my year away from her. Pictures of the dragons, co-workers, co-workers being chased by dragons, any girlfriends, and other pictures. She says it makes her feel as if she was with me the whole year."

“We...” Fred started, but Ginny cut him off.

“You don’t need their advice,” she told him with a laugh. “It usually results in mum shouting at them.”

“It’s her favorite pastime,” George said with a laugh. “We give her the golden opportunity to yell.” Harry rolled his eyes.

“What do you get your dad?” Harry asked. The Weasleys thought for a moment.

“Nothing,” Bill finally said. “If mum’s happy, then he’s happy. He’s even happy when the twins are getting yelled at.”

“Like George said,” Fred said, shaking his head, “it’s her favorite pastime.”

Harry laughed and they headed back to the Three Broomsticks. Harry could shop for the two Weasleys with Ron and whoever was going to come with them might have an idea or two. Harry grabbed Ginny’s hand and led her into the busy pub. Out the corner of his eye he saw Charlie give the dragon a look of longing.

They walked over to the table filled with the others from their group. Charlie had taken all of their purchases home for Harry and would arrive back soon. They sat talking about nothing in particular waiting for Bill to arrive back.

Ron asked Sephra how she got hurt. She shrugged.

“You don’t know how you got hurt like that?” Ron asked surprised.

“I can’t tell,” she mumbled.

“Why not?” Thia asked concerned. Just at that moment Harry felt a bone chilling cold.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispered to Ginny. She nodded and turned her attention back to the conversation.

Chapter Twenty-Two: To Dream Or Not To Dream

He looked me in the eyes
Direct and concise to remind me
To always do what's right.
Creed: Faceless Man

Harry walked outside, hoping that he had misinterpreted the cold. It seemed that no one else was affected by this mysterious cold, so maybe he was just imagining it. Just as he was about to go back into the pub, he saw the first dementor.

Harry watched it land, and several others soon landed at its side. He pulled out his wand, frantically thinking of a happy thought. This was easier said than done. Images of green light, screams, Cedric and Sirius falling, the graveyard, Sephra's parents, and all the Revelries filtered through his mind. He felt his knees give out as he listened to his mother's last pleas for his life.

"Expecto—" Harry feebly tried to say.

A dementor floated over to Harry and reached out to grab his neck. Harry recoiled from the touch and thought desperately of a happy thought. The dementor lowered its mouth and Harry's mind worked to ignore the screams. He felt the dementor's grasp at his neck. The pressure from its hands pushed Ginny's necklace into his windpipe. Ginny! He had to live for Ginny! He had to make sure that she was safe! He thought of all the time he spent with over the months and her face came vividly to his mind.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he bellowed. He was relieved to see Prongs shoot out of his wand and drive the dementor away. Harry felt the life-giving warmth of love and hope filter through his veins. He stood and looked around, searching for the dementors. He sent Prongs galloping after the creatures, saving those that were meant to be their prey. He looked back at the pub and shouted to Tonks, "Get Gin out of here!" He hunted for the one dementor that still affected him

He started to think that they were all gone and he was just cold from the weather, when he heard a scream from behind him. A young girl clutched at her mother's lifeless form looking for a way out. The dementor raised its hood and Harry sent Prongs after it. He knew Prongs would never get there in time to save the child, but he had to try. He pushed Prongs to go faster, thinking of every happy memory that he could remember. "No!" Harry screamed as the dementor kissed the girl, successfully sucking her soul away.

Harry heard a laugh from behind him and he turned to see Voldemort and thirty odd Death Eaters next to him. "You don't like my precious pets?" Voldemort asked with a laugh.

Harry looked around for his guard. They were just filtering out of the Three Broomsticks. Harry knew that they didn't have enough people to fight these Death Eaters. "What do you want, Tom?" Harry asked, stepping forward and out into the middle of the street.

"I want you to suffer and to die a slow and painful death," Voldemort said viciously. "But today I will settle with destroying Hogsmeade and killing everyone you love."

"Go to hell," Harry spat at the man. "That's where you belong."

"What fun would that be?" Voldemort asked. "What are you going to do? Are you going to fight me?" Harry heard Thia's urgent pleas of no, but he drew his wand anyway.

"Why, I think I am," Harry said pointing it at the man. Voldemort laughed mercilessly and Harry felt his scar erupt in pain.

"Then let's do this thing properly," Voldemort said becoming deadly serious. "Bow to death, Mr. Potter." Unlike their last duel, Harry bowed. This surprised Voldemort slightly, but the man recovered. "Not afraid of dying, Potter?"

"No, Tom," Harry replied evenly. "There are some things worse than death. You didn't bow," Harry said accusingly. "You really need to."

"First, I want you to meet one of my Death Eaters," Voldemort said, turning to the man at his right. "I'm not sure if you've met before. Remove your mask so that I can introduce you," Voldemort snapped at the Death Eater. Without a second thought, the Death Eater removed his mask and Harry heard several gasps from his guard. So they hadn't known about Snape's choice. "This is Severus, my personal potions master. Severus, I would like you to meet Mr. Potter. I believe that you have a score to settle with his father, so some day I'll let you play with him." Severus bowed graciously to his master.

"I look forward to that day, my Lord," Snape's oily voice said. Voldemort laughed.

"Now, where were we, Potter?" he asked turning his full attention on Harry. "Oh yes, the bow." He slightly inclined his head and said, "I think we are at an acceptable distance, don't you? Avada Kedavra!" he said without waiting for Harry's reply.

Harry saw, in that split second of decision time, a barrel full of rainwater under a building's waterspout. "Accio Barrel!" he yelled. The barrel was hit by the curse while it was still in the air and exploded under the force. Water sprayed everywhere and Harry heard someone clap.

"Very good, Mr. Potter, very good," Voldemort mocked him. "Top points for creativity. You could have just ducked it, but then one of your precious followers would have died. Your turn, take a shot at me," Voldemort said, holding his hands out to his side. Several of the Death Eaters shifted nervously behind him.

"Avelgule!" Harry shouted. Voldemort stepped to the side and let the spell hit the Death Eater behind him. The person panicked, pulling his mask off and clawing at his eyes. Voldemort just laughed at his servant and turned towards Harry.

"Crucio!" Harry transformed a rock in front of him into a shield and let the spell bounce off of it. It shot straight up into the air.

“Tres Flechum!” Harry yelled shooting three arrows at Voldemort. Voldemort just stepped to the side and this time the Death Eaters put shields up to protect themselves.

Voldemort waved his wand and a white light shot out at Harry. He ducked to the side because he didn’t know what it was. Unfortunately, it hit his arm, cutting it wide open. There were a few screams, but Harry ignored them; it was his left arm so he could still fight. “Nice try, Tom. Expelliarmus!” The spell missed, but the stunner Harry sent right after almost hit.

Voldemort looked slightly startled by the close shot; it seemed that the man had underestimated him. “Enough, this is boring me.”

“Or are you just running away, Tom?” Harry asked the man out of spite.

“Enough! Crucio!” Harry created another shield and deflected it away. This time it hit the Three Broomsticks and Harry watched as Ginny backed away from the falling debris.

“Get her out of here,” Harry yelled at his guard.

“Crucio!” Harry fell to the ground writhing in agony. “Tsk, tsk, Harry. And here I thought you were a capable wizard. Never let anything distract you from an enemy who is willing to kill you. Definitely not a silly little girl.” Harry screamed as the pain intensified. He was going to die; he knew it. The pain was too much to bear. It felt as if every single one of his nerves was on fire and nothing would ever be able to put the flames out.

The spell ended, but real flames replaced them. His left hand and arm were covered in the burning light and Harry couldn’t get himself together enough to put the flames out. He wondered where his guard was as welts covered his body. He was going to die, but he wished that Ginny would get out safely.

He heard “Crucio!” again and felt his body twist in agony. His back arched in a painful arc and Harry knew it was going to snap.

So much for a power he knows not, was what Harry thought would be his last thought. But then the pain subsided. The flames went out and Harry fought to stay conscious.

“What are you doing, Severus?” Voldemort’s stunned voice asked as Snape fell to the ground under the spell. “So you were the spy.” Snape miraculously stayed kneeling and wasn’t screaming. “I am disappointed in you, Severus. You must die painfully for your disservice to me, but I won’t kill you. Bella will. I’m sure you’ll enjoy her games.”

Voldemort kept the wand trained on Snape, completely ignoring everyone else. Thia ran over to Harry and said the counter-curse to the welt curse. The welts slowed their bleeding as the blood clotted and Harry felt the pain subside. “I can’t do anything about that burn, Harry,” she told him quietly. Harry and Thia shuddered as Snape let out his first scream. Harry’s scar split open from the pain Voldemort’s pleasure caused. “Just hang in there, Harry.”

“Where’s Gin?” he croaked out.

“I’m right here, luv,” she told him quietly.

Harry felt relief as he heard her voice and then he started to panic. “Get out of here, Gin,” he told her urgently.

“I’m not going anywhere without you, luv,” she told him confidently and she started to stroke his cheek. Harry felt his body relax under her touch, but he tensed when Snape let out an earsplitting screech. At that very moment, several pops were heard and forty or so Aurors in their white robes appeared. Tonks, who had left to get them hurried over to Harry, Thia, and Ginny.

“Get him out of here!” Tonks said throwing them a portkey.

“Rescue Snape for me,” Harry asked Tonks. Tonks looked at Harry’s face and nodded.

“On three then. One. Two. Three!” Harry felt the pull behind his navel and landed roughly on hard stone.

“Get him up on a bed,” the worried voice of Madame Pomfrey said. Harry felt strong arms lift him up onto a bed and take his glasses off.

There was a small scream after another group fell into the room. “Merlin!” Pomfrey’s voice cried out. “What happened to Severus?” Harry tried to stay awake, but shock took his body and he fell into a deep nightmare-free sleep.

Harry was walking along a cliff. There was an ocean at the bottom of the decline and Harry could hear the crashing of the waves below him. He didn’t know where he was walking or why he was walking, but he didn’t stop. Somehow he knew that it wouldn’t be good if he stopped.

Harry continued walking, listening to the sound of the ocean. He loved to listen to the sound it made and to the cry of the birds and the hum of the insects. He almost stopped when he realized that there were no bird cries and flying insects. The only sounds were the ocean, the wind, and the crunch of dry grass beneath his feet.

He looked around more closely at his surroundings. He couldn’t see another living creature anywhere. The grass was all dead and yellowed. The trees were twisted and sickly. But somehow this place didn’t worry him. It was peaceful and calm. He felt like he could rest here forever.

He kept walking, never stopping. Some inner voice or instinct was telling him to keep on walking. Something about this place, though, made him want to stop. He watched wistfully as he passed a smooth boulder that would have been perfect to sit on.

“Where am I?” Harry asked out loud to the empty air.

“Well,” a voice said to his left; Harry turned to the person waking beside him and nearly stopped. “Don’t stop walking, boy!” the man said urgently. Harry continued walking and noticed that this person just floated next to him. “As I was saying, the answer to that interesting question is just as interesting an answer as the question itself was.”

“Who are you?” Harry asked the man. He appeared to be old, especially considering his beard. He wore very old-fashioned round wire rimmed glasses. He was dressed in robes just as out of date as his glasses. Something about the man made Harry trust him.

“I am nothing at the moment,” he replied waving his hand in front of him. “Your question should be who was I?”

“Who were you?” Harry asked the strange man.

“That is a question I would very much like the answer to,” he said with a laugh. “Now who are you?”

“I’m—” he stopped talking. He wasn’t sure of how to answer. He didn’t know who he was.

“Not to worry, lad. Not to worry,” the man said patting Harry’s shoulder. “No one here knows who they are at first.”

“So where are we?” Harry asked again.

“The answer to that interesting question is just as interesting an answer as the question itself was.” Harry rolled his eyes at the old man and sped up his walk. The man kept matching Harry’s speed and never tired.

“So, what is that answer?” Harry asked after awhile.

“I don’t know,” the old man said with a laugh. Harry rolled his eyes and continued walking. “It’s a shame really. I always wanted to know the answer and so I stopped walking hoping that I’d be able—”

“Harry,” a familiar voice called his name. He knew it was his name, but he couldn’t place the voice. They went past a large boulder and the owner of the voice appeared. Harry almost stopped when he saw the features of Sirius before him. “Keep walking, Harry.”

“You’re dead,” Harry told the man logically. He didn’t know how he knew that, but he did.

“Yes I am,” he replied sadly. “I see you’ve met Godric Gryffindor.”

“Hush, Sirius. I’m nothing at the moment,” the man scolded Sirius.

“I’m sure you are,” Sirius said with a smile.

“Where am I?” Harry asked.

“As long as you don’t stop you’re in between life and death,” Sirius told him. “The second you stop, you’re dead.” Harry nodded.

“Why do I have to keep walking then? I’ll be with you and mum and dad,” Harry said surprising himself. He kept remembering little things. He just wished he could remember how he got here.

“No, don’t stop, lad,” the old man told him. “This place is a rather boring place. You need to experience life first.”

“I’ve had enough experience with life,” Harry replied bitterly.

“What about your Ginny?” a kind voice asked him. Harry turned, walking backwards, and saw his mother. “Will you just leave her?”

“Ginny?” Harry thought about the familiar name and stumbled over a stone in his path. He turned around and continued walking. “Who’s Ginny?” Harry thought hard about that name. There was something about it that he needed to remember about her.

“Cute red head with a temper,” his father said describing her to him. Harry stared at his father as they continued walking. Or rather, Harry walked and they floated next to him. The old man was floating in front of him staring at him. Sirius was to his left and Lily and James stood between the cliff’s edge and Harry. “She’s completely worth all her trouble though.”

“Ginny—” Harry felt a light turn on inside his head. “Ginny!” Everything came back to him. “I need to get back to her!”

“Hold on there, lad,” Gryffindor said. “We need to talk first.”

“What?” Harry asked warily.

“Be careful with your choices these next few years,” the old man said, staring him in the eyes. “Remember that you’ll see many paths and the only paths worth walking are difficult and hard. Don’t succumb to the easy paths. Walk the straight and narrow.”

“Don’t forget that you do have friends to help you,” Lily told him with a smile. “They won’t desert you. No matter what happens they will never leave you willingly.”

“Give Bella my regards,” Sirius said with a wicked grin on his face. “Make sure it hurts. And remember that we’re dead and we ain’t coming back. There’s no way for us to.”

“If you remember this when you awaken,” James said sadly. “Please ask Severus Snape to forgive me. I was a jerk when we were at school and I never apologized for that. Remember that he’s given a lot for our cause.”

“Tell him that Sam sends her love,” Lily said with another smile.

“And if you see Nott Senior,” Sirius added as an afterthought, “give him my regards as well.

“Now, lad,” Gryffindor addressed him. “All you have to do to go home is jump. That ocean out there is life and the moment you land in it you’ll return to it.”

“What happens if I don’t make it to the water?” Harry asked nervously.

“Well, I was always told that it was the stop that killed you,” Gryffindor said with a laugh.

“If you’re meant to live, Harry,” Lily said with an encouraging smile, “then you’ll make the water. If you’re meant to die you’ll stop at the ground and then find yourself back up here with us.”

“It was nice speaking with you, son,” James said, lightly ruffling Harry’s hair. “See you when you stop.”

Harry took a deep breath and then jumped off the edge. As he fell he thought how odd this was. Normally you jumped to die, but now he was jumping to live. He spread his arms out and closed his eyes. If he tried he could pretend that he was flying. He opened his eyes and looked down. There was no water below him. He was going to hit rock! He closed his eyes, thinking longingly of Ginny and waited to hit stones.

“Harry?” Ginny’s quiet voice woke him up fully. He tried to remember all the details of his dream. There was something about a cliff and he remembered talking with several people. He opened his eyes, but closed them when all the light hit them. “Oh, Harry!” She wrapped her arms around him and Harry felt all the air leave his body.

“Ginevra Molly Weasley!” the shocked voice of Mrs. Weasley rang out strongly. “Get off that boy right this moment and let him breathe!” Ginny got off Harry, throwing a shy look at her mum, but she turned to look back at Harry almost instantly. He smiled at her; Ginny was worth all the pain in the world. She put his glasses on his face for him.

“I don’t,” Harry croaked out, but his voice was too dry to continue. Ginny filled a glass up for him and helped him drink it. “Thanks,” he told her with a smile. “I don’t mind her hugs,” Harry finished with a smile at her. Ginny blushed scarlet and beamed back at him. “How do I look, Gin?”

“Hmm,” Ginny said thinking hard. “Where to start, where to start?” Harry tried to hit her, but his arm was bandaged and tied to his side. “Well, your right arm was broken when we landed wrong in the castle. Your left arm is healing from rather deep burns. Your spine needed some serious work, because it nearly snapped. You’ve got cuts and bruises up and down your body. You’re still suffering from Cruciatus damage. Your scar burst open again so it’s a scab. Did I miss anything?”

Harry laughed at her, but felt several sharp pains in his chest. “You forgot broken ribs.”

"Oh yes," Ginny said cheerfully. "You broke eight ribs." Harry smiled and looked around him. There were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, standing next to Bill and Charlie. Remus and Tonks were talking to two adults he didn't know. Harry couldn't see the twins or Shacklebolt or Moody. Ron was next to Ginny with his arm around Hermione.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked Hermione, just a bit rudely. "Sorry, not to be rude, but you're supposed to be at home with your mum and dad."

Ginny hit his head as Hermione started crying again. "You prat! What did you think she'd do? Stay at home celebrating Christmas as her best friend was dying?"

"I almost died?" Harry asked surprised. Several people started to laugh at the statement, but Madame Pomfrey stuck her head out her office door and shushed them.

"Yeah, mate," Ron told him quietly. "You were walking a fine line there." For some reason that brought the faint memory of Harry's dream back, but he couldn't remember any of the details. "Glad you're back in the land of the living."

"It's nice to be back," Harry answered truthfully. "I'm guessing I'm on pain killers, 'cause I can't feel any pain in my arms."

"Yeah," Ginny said from her spot next to him. "You know what I think?" Harry shook his head no. "I think you like all the attention you're given while you're in the hospital wing, so you get your dark wizard chum Voldie to hurt you so that you can get in here." Harry laughed painfully and smiled at her. She was definitely worth it. Why did that sound familiar?

He yawned and forced his eyes to remain open. He wasn't ready to stay awake for long yet. Mrs. Weasley saw this and shooed everyone away. Harry let the sleep over come him and he slept a dreamless sleep.

Harry awoke a second time to a dark room. It was the night of... well he didn't know, but he hoped Christmas hadn't come and gone yet.

He looked around the room and realized that someone had taken off his glasses again. He looked down at his arms and cursed their bandages. There was no way he'd be able to put them on.

"Need some help?" the kind voice of Dumbledore asked. Harry nodded and he felt his glasses slip on his face.

"Thank you," Harry said.

"Shh," Dumbledore said hushing him. "I'd rather not have Poppy shoo me out quite yet. And Severus is a few beds over sleeping."

"Is he going to survive?" Harry asked lowering his voice.

"Yes," Dumbledore nodded. "I'm told that you weren't all that surprised to see Severus at the battle or take his mask off." Harry looked away from the headmaster.

"I saw Voldemort talk to him one night right after Halloween," Harry finally said. "I heard Voldemort tell him to make a choice when the battle of Hogsmeade began."

"And why didn't you tell me?" Dumbledore asked softly.

"Because he needed to make that choice himself," Harry replied with a shrug. "It was the perfect opportunity for him to make sure he was making the right choices, fighting the right fights."

"I see," Dumbledore said barely audibly. Harry looked around the hospital wing. A few beds over hung a privacy screen. Harry guessed that Snape was behind it.

"I need more training," Harry said after a long pause.

"I know," Dumbledore added tiredly. "We'll talk about it when you're out of the hospital wing."

Harry nodded and looked down at his bedcovers. He tried to recall his dream from earlier, but couldn't remember it. It hadn't been a

nightmare, but something made him think that it wasn't a normal dream either.

"I heard about your Patronus," Dumbledore said with a smile. Harry unconsciously ran his fingers along his necklace.

"Yeah, but I didn't get Prongs there in time to rescue that little girl and her mum," Harry said softly. Dumbledore gazed at him worriedly.

"It's not your fault, Harry," Dumbledore reasoned with him.

"It wouldn't have happened if I weren't there," Harry told him, raising his voice slightly.

"Harry, you have just finished telling me that Voldemort knew about this battle in early November," Dumbledore said calmly, trying to get Harry to see the truth. "How could Voldemort possibly know that you'd be there then, when you yourself didn't even know a week ago?"

Harry nodded, but couldn't shake the guilt from his mind. He hadn't reacted soon enough, he hadn't thought of a happy thought soon enough. Had he thought of Ginny sooner, he would have been able to save them.

"How long have I been in here?" Harry asked to distract himself.

"Well, the rest of Friday, all of Saturday and Sunday and you woke up around three this afternoon," Dumbledore responded cheerfully. "You had us worried there for a while, we thought you might just stop—"

"That's it," Harry said loudly, remembering his dream.

"What's it?" Dumbledore asked curiously. Harry looked away from the old man's penetrating gaze and shrugged. Dumbledore was just about to ask again when the angry form of Poppy Pomfrey came into sight.

“Headmaster, I must ask you to leave at once,” she said forcefully. “I cannot have you in here exciting my patients.” Dumbledore bowed his head gracefully and stood.

“Goodnight, Harry. Goodnight, Poppy.” He strode down the room and left through the doors silently.

“My goodness,” she said with a huff. “I tell him that he can be in here as long as he doesn’t excite one of you, and may I ask you what he does?” she said smoothing out Harry’s blankets needlessly. “He goes and makes you yell. If you children didn’t need me so desperately I would quit in protest.” She left in a huff and Harry couldn’t help but smile at the woman. She would never quit, not unless Dumbledore was gone forever.

Harry lay there, silently thinking of his dream. Had he made it up or had it really happened? He had been unconscious for three days. There was no way that dream took three days to happen. Unless time was handled differently between life and death and in that case it could have happened.

Should he tell someone else about it? His mum had given Harry a message to tell Snape. “Sam sends her love.” What did that mean? And his dad wanted him to apologize to the man for his mistakes. Could Harry do that? Could he convince Snape that he was telling the truth?

“You let them get away,” Voldemort screamed at the prone forms of Wormtail and Bellatrix. “Crucio!” Voldemort cursed them, causing both people to scream in agony. They didn’t look so good and Harry had the distinct feeling that this wasn’t the first time they were punished. The longer Voldemort held the spell on them the more Harry’s scar burned.

“What do you have to say for yourselves?” Voldemort asked taking the spell off of them.

“One of the Aurors knocked me unconscious,” Wormtail murmured quietly.

“One of the Aurors knocked you unconscious?” Voldemort hissed at him. “One of the Aurors knocked you unconscious? That may be true, but I have a feeling you knocked yourself unconscious once Potter was gone.” Wormtail whimpered and Voldemort used a spell to force the man’s face up. “Legilimens!” Harry was disgusted by the mind Voldemort was picking through. Finally, Voldemort found the memory he was looking for and threw the man from him with a Banishing Charm.

“Get out of my sight you filthy piece of garbage!” Wormtail fled from the room and Voldemort turned to Bellatrix’s trembling form. “And what about you, Bella?”

“I did not expect them to rescue him, my Lord,” she replied without looking up at him. “I did not think that they would rescue his worthless hide.”

“Bella, Bella, Bella,” Voldemort’s voice rang out and Harry’s scar exploded in pain. “You did not expect that? Gryffindors and those that follow them are known for their heroics. They live to save the day.” He laughed and Harry watched as Bellatrix lost control of her trembling form. “No doubt Potter told one of them to save the man that had saved him.”

“I did not think of that,” Bellatrix whispered with a shudder.

“It’s ‘I did not think of that, my Lord!’” Voldemort spat. “Do not forget your place, Bella! I gave you the perfect opportunity to get your revenge on Severus and you wasted it!”

“Y-yes, my Lord,” she stammered out.

“Get out of my sight!” he yelled at her. “Tell Lucius to enter on your way out.” Harry waited as Voldemort waited for Lucius. It seemed that Voldemort had finally gotten around to freeing his Death Eaters from Azkaban.

“Ah, Lucius, my faithful servant,” Voldemort said quietly. Harry watched as Lucius crawled forward and kissed the hems of Voldemort’s robes.

"I live to serve you, my Lord," Lucius said in a courteous voice. Voldemort looked at the man with disdain.

"Do you know why I kept you in Azkaban so long?" Voldemort asked calmly. Lucius remained frozen on the ground in front of Voldemort. Minutes passed and nothing was said. "I would like an answer, Lucius."

Lucius shifted under Voldemort's gaze, but didn't answer. Time passed and Lucius still didn't answer. Harry felt Voldemort's anger increase as Lucius' silence continued. The pain in Harry's scar grew worse as Lucius did not answer the question.

"Crucio!" Lucius screamed under the spell and Harry wondered how Snape hadn't screamed under it immediately like everyone else did. The pain exploded in Harry's scar as Voldemort's temper broke.

"I will have complete obedience from my Death Eaters. I have already lost one of them to the mudblood loving fool and I will not lose another! Is that understood?" Lucius continued to scream under the curse. "I will not be mocked when my back is turned! Is that understood?" Lucius' voice gave out from the screaming. "I will not suffer fools and I will not suffer weak followers! Now, answer my question!" Voldemort released the spell and waited impatiently for Lucius' answer.

"Because," he croaked out, "I didn't go there after your downfall."

"Very good," Voldemort said. "So now you understand why I am going to punish you again. Crucio!" Harry screamed with Lucius' silent scream. As much as he hated the man writhing in agony, this was not right.

The door opened and Avery entered. He crawled forward and kissed Voldemort's hems. He shuffled back without ever once looking at Lucius' screaming form or Voldemort's expression of glee. Voldemort ignored him; his news could wait. Lucius had to understand that he was required to give him his undivided loyalty. Finally, Voldemort lifted the curse and turned his attention to Avery.

"My Lord," he started; Harry could hear the fear in his voice. Voldemort nodded for the man to continue. "I have word from Hogwarts. Both live and both will survive." Voldemort continued to look at the man and Avery shuddered.

"This is not good news," he whispered. Avery fell forward, bowing. Harry thought he heard the man begging for forgiveness. "I was hoping that something had gone right with this plan, but it seems not. Be gone, Avery. I wish to speak with Lucius alone." Avery bowed even lower (Harry hadn't thought that possible) and shuffled out of the room.

Voldemort turned his attention back to the twitching body of Lucius Malfoy. "Have you spoken with your son, Lucius?" Lucius nodded from where he lay prostrated. "Is he willing to follow me?" Lucius nodded again. "Very good, Snape wasn't able to corrupt him. I have a task for your son. Are you willing to let him serve me?"

"He's too young, my Lord," Lucius said aloud.

"Wrong answer. Crucio!"

"Wake up, boy, and stop your infernal screaming!"

Chapter Twenty-Three: A Talk or Two

I'm a nightmare, a disaster,
That's what they always say.
I'm a lost cause, not a hero.
But I'll make it on my own.
Simple Plan: Me Against the World

Harry's eyes snapped open and he shut his mouth, effectively ending his screaming. The privacy curtain between Snape's bed and his had been removed and a very angry looking Snape was sitting up in bed looking at him.

"Could you keep your screaming to yourself?" Snape asked in his normal, cheerless voice.

"No," Harry replied dryly. "I don't understand why any of you serve Voldemort."

"I've asked you not to use his name," Snape told him sharply.

"And I'm still going to use it," Harry replied. "All he does is abuse you and scream at you and order you around. It's not even worth the hassle of being a Death Eater."

"You know nothing about us," Snape replied acidly.

"I watch you all have fun at your Revelries and then get the crap Crucio'ed out of you," Harry told him quietly. "There's always someone every week who needs punishing. Last week it was you. This week it's Bellatrix, Wormtail, and Lucius. The thousand galleon question is: who is going to say the wrong thing and get abused next week?"

Snape looked at Harry carefully. The only light was from the waning moon and Snape had a hard time seeing Harry's face. Luckily for Harry, no one had taken off his glasses so he could still see.

"How much do you watch?" Snape asked finally.

"Too much," Harry replied faintly. "I see almost every Revelry and a punishment every other week. My scar burns like hell the weeks I don't see the actual punishment."

"I see," Snape said carefully. "And what did you see tonight?"

"Bellatrix and Wormtail getting punished for letting us escape," Harry told him quietly. He laid his head down on his pillow and thought the vision through. "He didn't like their excuses. Then Lucius got in trouble."

"Lucius actually got in trouble?" Snape interrupted surprised.

"Yes, he did," Harry told Snape coldly. "I'm not making this stuff up. He was under the Cruciatus Curse for a long time. He wouldn't answer a question. Avery came in and told Voldemort that we were alive and expected to stay that way. Then Voldemort dismissed him and he asked Lucius if Draco," Harry spat the boy's name out as if it was poisonous, "was willing to serve."

"Lucius said he was, correct?" Snape said with a faint smile.

"Yes," Harry replied giving Snape an odd look. "There was some task that Malfoy was supposed to do, but your angelic voice woke me up before I heard what."

"I'm guessing it's to kill me," Snape said dryly. "Or at the least capture me."

"You're rather calm about it," Harry told him.

"I'm just happy to be alive," Snape said with a sigh. "You don't usually get away from the Dark Lord when you turn traitor right in front of him." A silence fell between them and Harry stared out his window at the setting moon.

"Why'd you save me?" Harry asked after a while. Snape sat back up and looked at the boy.

“I’m not really sure,” Snape replied truthfully. “I wasn’t sure which side I would pick. I figured I’d go along with the Dark Lord to stay alive. If I wanted to remain a part of the Order I could have told them that it was all a part of the costume.”

“Oh,” Harry said thoughtfully. “But why’d you step in front of that curse?”

“Because I couldn’t watch a boy take that torture,” Snape replied honestly, but venomously. “Even if that boy was you.”

“Well, thanks, I appreciate it,” Harry told the man.

“Don’t mention it again,” Snape said angrily.

“You’re not good with apologies are you?” Harry asked the shadowy form of his Potions Professor.

“No, I never was,” he answered. There was something about being in the hospital wing—perhaps it was the inability of attacking each other—that made them talk to each other civilly, or at least compared to normal circumstances.

“How could you be a Death Eater if you can’t watch kids get beaten up?” Harry asked, confused.

“It was the biggest mistake of my life,” Snape said tiredly. “And it ruined what could have been a perfect one.” Harry thought about his talk with his mum. He almost told Snape the message, but something held him back.

“That doesn’t really answer my question,” Harry informed him.

Snape glared at Harry but answered anyway. “I worked alone. I didn’t pick kids to poison. If I had to, I’d used my doctored potions. Mostly I made poisons for others to use.”

Harry looked at the man several beds away. What had made him become a Death Eater and what made him come back?

“Why do you continue to fight?” Snape asked after a short pause. Harry didn’t get a chance to answer, as Snape almost immediately stated, “And spare me from your arrogance. You’re not the hero.”

“If you say so,” Harry told him quietly.

“What makes you think that you are?” Snape asked waspishly. “You are nothing more than a sixteen year-old boy who finds himself in more trouble than he can handle far too often. More often than not, it’s because you stuck your nose in where it didn’t belong.” Harry glared at the man. He would never be able to figure him out. They were actually being civil and then he had to go and say that. “You’re nothing more than a boy without parents, without a family, and without any drive to live to see tomorrow.”

“If you say so,” he said quietly. As they had talked the moon had set and the sun had risen. The sun was streaming in, but thankfully the east was at his back, so the sun wasn’t in his eyes.

“I do,” Snape replied knowingly.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Madame Pomfrey said cheerfully as she walked into the hospital wing an hour later. “Let’s see how you both are. You first, Severus.” Harry laid his head back and ignored the “Tut, tut,” that continued to come from her. “I’m afraid you’ll have to stay another day, Severus.”

She walked over to Harry and took out her wand. She murmured a spell and a translucent white light shone from it. She passed it slowly over his body, but didn’t say anything, good or bad. She waved her wand when she was done and the light disappeared. She carefully removed the bandages of his right arm and told him to wiggle his fingers.

“Does that hurt?” she asked softly. Harry shook his head no. “Now bend your wrist. Good, now rotate it. Does it hurt?” Once again Harry shook his head no. “Now bend your elbow. Does that hurt?” Harry shook his head no once more. Other than being a little sore it was fine.

She went to the other side of the bed and took off the bandages from his burn. Harry had to grit his teeth when she got to the last layer. "I'm sorry, but the burn wouldn't heal with magic. The burn salve that I put on will help, but it will be slow. I'll teach Molly how to change the bandages so that you can leave."

"When will that be?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Today, if the Headmaster gives his approval," she replied smiling at his whoop of joy. "Until then you may stay in your dorm. You must come to see me at noon for a new bandage." Harry nodded and smiled at her. "If you hurry up, you'll make it for breakfast. Here are some robes for you to put on. I'll just move the screens in place for you."

Harry left the hospital wing happy. Just as the door was about to shut he turned around and walked back to Snape's bed. "I'd just like to thank you again," he said quietly. "And I hope you get better soon, Professor Snape." Harry turned and walked slowly out the hospital, trying desperately not to run.

"Have a good morning, Harry," he heard the Potions Master reply.

"Harry!" Ginny shouted, running from her spot at the house table and hugging him tightly. He wrapped his arms around her the best he could, but he couldn't bend his left arm quite right. "I didn't think she'd let you out so soon," she continued, happily leading him to the table. Only a handful of the students had decided to remain at Hogwarts and Harry couldn't see Ron or Hermione.

"Where is everyone?" Harry asked after sitting down. He piled food onto his plate. He knew he hadn't eaten properly since Friday morning and he was starving.

"At home," she replied laughing. "I disobeyed orders and floo-ed here without anyone. That's how much I'm willing to risk for you." Harry smiled down at her and kissed her cheek softly.

"Thanks, Gin," he told her from the bottom of his heart. He owed a lot to this girl.

"It's no problem, luv," she replied, squeezing his right hand. He didn't want to let go of her hand but he needed it to eat.

"Gin, can I have my hand, please?" he asked, teasing her.

"What? Oh, sorry," she said, blushing ever so slightly.

"Why were you in here then?" Harry asked curiously.

"I thought I should tell someone that I was here, so I told Professor McGonagall," she replied pointing at the head table. Harry nodded and dug into his food. Ginny watched him with a smile, laughing at him every once in a while. Harry ignored her and concentrated on eating. It wasn't until she tickled his knee that he turned to her again.

"Oh sure, just tickle the cripple," Harry said sarcastically.

"Yep!" she said brightly. She brushed her lips against his and then tickled him again. Harry reached out with his right hand and returned fire. After a few minutes they stopped and Harry noticed that several people were staring.

"See what you did?" Harry said, motioning to the rest of the room with his head. Ginny just laughed. They sat in silence and Ginny let Harry finish eating. The Great Hall emptied out as Harry took his time eating. He was finally done, so Ginny got up to leave. Harry was about to stand too when the Great Hall doors burst open. Harry saw Mrs. Weasley in a towering rage.

"Ginevra Weasley!" she started to yell. Harry noticed the all of the Weasley boys and Hermione enter behind her. "I told you that you could NOT come to Hogwarts by yourself! I went into your room and found you gone! Hermione didn't know where you were! Ron didn't know where you were! None of your brothers or your father knew! I thought you were better behaved than Ron and the twins! I'd expect them to leave without a note! They've done it before!" Harry decided that he couldn't watch Ginny fade under her mother's wrath any longer. He stood up and smiled at Mrs. Weasley. "You leave without

telling a soul – oh good morning Harry – and we spend—” She stopped and looked at Harry again.

“Hello, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said cheerfully, standing in front of Ginny.

“You’re out of bed,” she said without thinking.

“Yes, it appears that I am,” Harry said with a laugh. Everyone joined him, even Mrs. Weasley. “I’m sorry if I got Ginny in trouble,” he said lying. “I floo-ed and she was the only one around. I told her that I was bored and needed someone to eat with. She didn’t want to get Ron up—it was too early—and she didn’t want to get Hermione in trouble, so she left by herself.” Ginny grabbed his hand and squeezed it thankfully.

“That’s very nice of you to try and get her out of trouble, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley began, “but Ginny completely ignored what I told her by coming here without someone.”

“I begged her to come, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry told her earnestly. “There was no way she wasn’t going to come.”

Mrs. Weasley looked at Harry and then to the smiling Ginny behind him. “She should have left a note,” Mrs. Weasley said weakly.

“Yes she should have,” Harry said agreeing with her. He turned around and faced Ginny. “You should leave a note the next time you leave home without permission,” he told her sternly. Ginny had a hard time keeping her face straight. “I’m disappointed in you, Gin,” he said angrily, but he was smiling at her. “You shouldn’t let me convince you to go against your mum’s commands. You need to be stronger than that next time.”

“Harry, if you’re done convincing us that you’re lying,” Hermione said cutting him off, “you can tell us when you can come back to the Burrow.” Harry turned around and smiled.

“As soon as the Headmaster says so,” he said happily.

“And what if the Headmaster said never?” Dumbledore asked from directly behind Ginny. Harry laughed as he felt Ginny jump in fright. “I’m sorry, Ginevra. I didn’t mean to startle you.” Ginny grimaced at the use of her full name, but Harry smiled at the old man.

“I’d like to talk with you, sir,” he said meaningfully.

“Molly,” Dumbledore said turning to Mrs. Weasley, “Poppy just informed me that, in order for Harry to leave with you today, you must learn how to apply his bandages for his burn.” Molly nodded and hurried up the stairs to the infirmary.

“Go with her, Gin,” Harry whispered in her ear. “I’d rather you change them.” She smiled at him and followed her mum, dragging Hermione behind her.

“Harry, would you like to talk with Professor Dumbledore on your own?” Ron asked slightly hurt. Harry thought about it. That wasn’t why he sent Ginny, but they all thought it was.

“I would like to speak to Harry alone,” Dumbledore clarified. “Charlie, Hagrid has received an interesting shipment today. I’m sure you’d like to take a look. All of you, except Ronald, are invited to take a look, actually. Hagrid won’t let any of his students see until their classes begin.”

“What should I do?” Ron asked hopelessly as his brothers and father headed to Hagrid’s.

“Go up to the hospital wing and be with Hermione,” Harry told him. “I’ll meet you guys in the common room later?” Ron nodded and Harry left with Professor Dumbledore.

They walked up to his office in silence; Harry was thinking about everything he didn’t know how to do. They stood still as the spiraling stair case lead them to the office door.

“Please have a seat, Harry,” Dumbledore said, motioning to the chair next to Thia. “What do you want to learn, Harry?”

Harry thought about the answer for a moment. His first reply was wrong; he felt like saying he wanted to learn how to survive this Prophecy. However, he knew Dumbledore would take it the wrong way. He wanted to learn everything out there. Anything that might help him out in the long run.

"I need to learn more spells," Harry answered finally. "I need to learn some healing and I need to get into better shape." He stopped for a moment and thought again. "I need to learn how to see everything without taking the time to analyze it. I need to spend more time with Occulmency."

"I have some — let's call them friends — that can help you," Thia finally said after glancing at Dumbledore. "One's a battle healer, another's a spell master, and the last one specializes in physical training. They'll be able to help you a lot."

"Will they be willing to help teach him?" Dumbledore asked.

"I believe so," Thia answered, after a moment's pause. "They all owe me huge favours so they should be willing with that added on." Dumbledore nodded. There was a pause as Dumbledore thought about something.

"I'll need to drop classes," Harry finally said. "I'm not giving up the D.A. or Quidditch and I'd still like to train with Thia."

Dumbledore thought about this for a moment. "I'm not sure, Harry. What classes would you drop?"

Harry's first thought was Potions, but he realized that he didn't want to. "Herbology and... Charms," he finally thought. "Herbology was always a filler course and if I'm learning from a Spell Master, there have to be some charms in there somewhere."

Dumbledore thought about it with a frown. "You can't make him give up the things he finds joy in, Professor," Thia said softly. "He's got to have some free time with his friends and time to do the things that he loves. And the students get a lot out of the D.A. I'm impressed with

how much they learn from him.” Dumbledore looked at her for a while, then he turned his gaze onto the blushing Harry.

“Very well, you may drop those two classes. However, I would still like you to sit the N.E.W.T. Level Charms exam at the end of your seventh year.” Harry nodded.

“Fair enough,” he replied. “When can I go back to the Burrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Dumbledore said with authority. “I want you to stay here one more day and then you can go.” Harry nodded once again, but he wasn’t happy.

“Can Ron, Hermione, and Ginny stay the night?” Harry asked hopefully.

“I don’t think so,” Dumbledore said with a frown. “Think of it as your punishment for not telling me about Voldemort’s threat to Severus.”

“I still think he needed to pick on his own,” Harry said bristling.

“I would disagree with you on this one, Harry,” Dumbledore said sternly.

“You can’t just force him to do whatever you like!” Harry yelled at him. He hadn’t realized that his temper had risen. “You can’t just force him to spy his whole life!”

“I have never forced him too,” Dumbledore replied calmly.

“Do you really think that he would have just said, ‘Hey, I don’t feel like spying anymore, so I quit.’?” Harry asked surprised. “He’s not like that. Very few people are!” Harry shook his head in surprise. “No one wants to disappoint you, Professor! None of us would quit on you for a stupid reason like fear or weariness or pain or any of the other billion things he had to put up with as our spy! I watched him and other Death Eaters get the crap beaten out of them just because someone else messed up and they were nearby!”

“He accepted those—“ Dumbledore started, but Harry cut him off.

"He accepted those dangers when he was in his early twenty's if not late teens! He's almost forty! He's not young anymore and experiencing the Cruciatus regularly can't be good for anyone!" Harry took a deep breath. "He needed a chance to switch sides this time around. The last time the opportunity presented itself, he took it and became our spy. This time he couldn't make up his mind. In the end his decency won out and he's still on our side. He needed to make sure that he was fighting the fight he believed in or at the very least fighting against the side he's against."

Dumbledore surveyed Harry over his half moon glasses. There was a long silence as both Thia, thoroughly surprised at Harry's outburst, and Harry, a bit surprised himself, waited for Dumbledore's response. "You can't just force him to fight for you, Professor," Harry added quietly. "If you do then you aren't that much better than Tom." Harry watched as a cloud passed over Dumbledore's eyes, but it was gone quickly.

"You're right, Harry," Dumbledore finally said. "I never thought of it like that. Your friends, though, still cannot stay here for the night." Harry was stunned and just stared at Dumbledore.

"Why not, Professor?" Thia asked him, also taken aback. Dumbledore, it appeared, was deep in thought.

"Because I said so," Dumbledore finally said with all the authority he had. "There's only one Gryffindor boy here this Christmas and I dare say he'll let you bunk with him."

"Please let them stay," Harry said quietly.

"I am sorry, Harry," Dumbledore said in a voice of finality, "but, alas, I cannot let them stay."

"Well, I'm going to go find them and tell them that," Harry said bitterly. "Have a good morning, Professor Dumbledore. See you later, Thia." Harry left the room quickly and jumped down the stairs, too angry to wait for them to take him down.

"I hope you have a good reason for this, Professor," Thia said after the door shut.

"Oh, I do," Dumbledore said with a smile. "You'll contact your 'friends'?"

"Yes, I'll send the letters today."

"Good."

"What's the matter, luv?" Ginny asked an hour and a half later. He hadn't felt like going to the common room so had gone to his cliff in the Room of Requirement.

"Nothing," he lied angrily. Ginny gave him a worried look and went over to stand next to him. The weather was stormy again and the wind blew out to sea. Hermione and Ron took seats under the oak tree and let Ginny deal with the angry boy.

"We've been looking for you, luv," Ginny said, taking his right hand in hers. It felt odd to be on this side of him. She was usually on the other side so that she could still use her dominant left hand. "How long have you been here?"

"An hour," Harry answered shortly. "Maybe a little longer."

"Why didn't you come to the common room?" Ginny asked, sitting down with her feet hanging over the edge. Harry sat with her and Ginny snuggled into him.

"I needed to think," he said quietly. He owed so much to this wonderful girl next to him. He wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for her. "I'm sorry that I didn't go get you guys from the common room, but I needed to think alone."

"About what, luv?" she asked, looking up at his face. Harry smiled at her and kissed her quickly.

"About life in general," Harry answered vaguely. He felt Ginny's temper rise and he prepared for her shout.

"And what about life in general do you need to think about?" she asked calmly, surprising Harry. He looked down at her angry face and smiled at her. She hit him in the chest and Harry laughed.

"Oh, I had to compare the beauty of the rising sun to the beauty of my girlfriend," he said dreamily. "I decided the sun rise faded in comparison to her."

"I'm serious, luv, what were you thinking of?" Harry looked at her. When had she started to call him that? He decided that he would wait to ask her when Ron wasn't sitting right behind them.

"I was thinking of the new training I'm going to have," he answered her tiredly. "How stupid the Prophecy is. I was thinking about Snape for a bit." Ginny noticed that the normal venom that usually accompanied Snape's name was lacking. "How aggravating Dumbledore can be. How I need to apologize for yelling at him once again." Harry ran his fingers through his hair. His arm went back to its spot on Ginny's shoulder but he didn't continue.

"What else, luv?" Ginny asked. Harry looked at her, startled; he really didn't want to say it aloud.

"I was thinking of death," he finally answered. "And what I'd miss out on if I die because of this." Ginny froze in shock. Harry looked away from her and turned his eyes towards the stormy horizon.

"I don't ever want you to think of that again, Mr. Harry Potter," she finally said, furious. "Ever! You will survive!" She stopped and forced his chin down to look at her. "You have to believe that you will! You have to live," she said quietly. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought she had added 'for me' on the end.

"But it's still a possibility, Gin," he replied seriously. "I would have died Friday, had Snape not saved me. I owe him my life." Ginny looked at him worriedly, but Harry ignored it. "I keep getting lucky when I face Voldemort. My mum protects me with an ancient charm. Voldemort's curse rebounds on him. Ancient charm protects me from the grasp of Quirrell. Voldemort flees without a host. Fawkes and the Sorting Hat

come to my rescue when I'm trying to rescue you. Voldemort's memory fades away, destroyed by the fang stuck in my arm. I only survive because of Fawkes. I only survived the duel in the graveyard because we have brother wands. I won the Priori Incantatem and was able to escape because the cup was a portkey back. The only reason I survived meeting Voldemort this summer was because Dumbledore showed up to duel with him. And this time, well, Snape took the punishment." Harry stopped and looked at Ginny, his eyes full of anguish. "How can I be so lucky and how can I expect to stay so lucky?"

"I don't know if it was luck, luv," she answered quietly. "Your mum's love saved you the first two times. Your loyalty to Dumbledore, which is a form of love, and true Gryffindor-ism saved you second year. Your will power saved you fourth year and your love for your parents and Sirius saved you last year. As for Snape, well I don't know what made him do it, but it had to be a strong emotion to take that punishment."

Harry looked at her with astonishment; he had never thought of it like that. Had love actually saved him every year? Harry shook his head to try and clear it from the extra thoughts that crowded it. "Maybe, Gin, but how can I count on it next time?" Ginny rolled her eyes at him and didn't answer.

They sat together in silence, each thinking their own thoughts. Had they spoken them out loud they would have been surprised at how similar they were. Harry promised himself that no matter what happened to him, he'd make sure that his three friends would survive. He couldn't forget, however, that if they did survive without him that probably meant Voldemort had won, and so it wouldn't be a life worth living.

Ginny, on the other hand, was promising herself that come what may she would make sure Harry survived it. She didn't care if Voldemort died or not, Harry had to survive. Not just survive, but also be able to live his life afterwards. She could tell how much this affected him. He had grown up too much since the graveyard.

"Thanks, Gin," he said after a while. He squeezed her arm where his hand was and looked at her.

"For what?" Ginny asked, slightly confused, but very curious.

"For giving me the necklace," he said with a smile.

"You already thanked me for that, luv," she scolded him lightly.

"Yeah, but it saved my life," he told her. "I couldn't think of a happy thought when the Dementor was lowering its hood to kiss me, but its hands pushed the stone into my neck and I thought of you." He smiled at her. "You're a life saver, Gin."

"Oh, luv," she said, launching herself at him. He didn't mind the hug, but it caused him to lose his balance. His burnt arm couldn't support his weight and they toppled over the edge of the cliff. He heard Hermione scream and Ron curse, but he and Ginny were laughing. They had fallen only two or three feet to the sandy beach below.

He looked up to the cliff, now appearing to be hundreds of feet high, and waved to the tiny figures of Ron and Hermione. He and Ginny started to walk along the beach, happy to be together and relatively alone. That, however, didn't last long. There was a loud thud and Hermione and Ron ran to catch up.

"You never told us about that," Hermione said accusingly.

"Yes I did," Harry replied. "When you thought I was going to jump, I told you that there was a safety net. Well, that's the safety net." The four walked along the beach for a couple hours, talking about mundane things like Quidditch (the Holyhead Harpies were first in league and weren't looking back) and school and what they hoped to get for Christmas in two days. Nevertheless, underneath it all they couldn't forget about what one of them would need to do, and they couldn't help but believe that they wouldn't all survive this war.

"He won't let us stay!" Ron yelled at supper that night. "Why not?"

"I don't know," Harry said tiredly. He had waited as long as he could to tell them about the plans. "He wouldn't tell me why."

"Maybe if we talked to him?" Gin said hopefully.

"No, I don't think so," Harry said, shaking his head. "He has his mind set and nothing is going to change it. He's a pretty stubborn person."

"I'm worse," Ginny said angrily. Harry smiled at her.

"I know, Gin, but let's pick our battles," he told her. "It's only one night and I want to go Neville's later this break, so we'll give him this one."

Ginny nodded angrily and the other two gave in. The other Weasleys were at the head table discussing Order business. Harry didn't mind that, because it gave him time to be with his friends. Supper ended and Harry walked them down to the castle entrance. Ginny, Ron, and Hermione would be taking a portkey back and the others were going to apparate back because it was easier.

"Bye, luv," Ginny said as she hugged him good-bye.

"I'm coming home tomorrow, Gin," he told her with a laugh. "It's not like we won't see each other for years." He swore he heard her say, 'you never know,' but he wasn't sure.

Harry said good-bye to every one else and waited until they left. He then walked slowly up to the castle, feeling slightly deserted. He knew it wasn't their fault that they had to leave, but he already missed them. He had no idea what he was going to do until ten o'clock the next morning when he would arrive at the Burrow.

Once in the common room Harry was surprised to see that only five students were still here. There were four girls from the third and fourth years and one boy in his first year. Harry walked over to the lone boy and smiled at him.

"Hey, I'm Harry," he said holding out his hand. The boy took it, his face filled with awe.

"I'm..." but he couldn't get his mouth to form his name; he blushed. "Sorry, I'm Christopher Harens."

"It's nice to meet you, Christopher." Harry looked at the boy. He looked lonely and bored. "Do you go by Chris or Christopher?"

"Whatever," he answered with a shrug. "Most people just call me Christopher."

"Mind if I call you Chris?" Harry asked. He had the feeling that this boy didn't have many friends.

"No," Chris said quickly. They sat in silence for a little bit, but it didn't take Harry long to realize that the boy was working on Charms homework.

"What are you learning about in Charms, Chris?" Harry asked politely. He couldn't remember any spells he had learnt during those first two years.

"Oh," Chris said blushing, "I'm working on some extra work. I don't get Charms, so Professor Flitwick gave me extra homework."

"What spell are you working on?" Harry asked nicely. He would miss Flitwick when he dropped that class.

"This is for the floating spell," he answered pointing at the paper in front of him. "I've got loads of others though."

"Wingardium Leviosa?" Harry asked. The boy nodded and Harry let out a laugh. This caused the boy to blush and the girls to look over at them. "Sorry, I'm not laughing at you, but at my best mate Ron. He had loads of problems with that spell."

"He did?" Chris asked quietly.

"Well, he did until he used it to knock out a troll," Harry said laughing harder.

“He did what?” Chris asked surprised. The girls had heard him too and were pretending not to listen in.

“It was our first year on Halloween. We had Charms that day and Ron was paired up with Hermione,” Harry said reminiscently.

“Bet he liked that,” one of girls said before she could stop herself. Her face turned red as Harry looked over at them and laughed.

“Let’s go sit by the fire so that they don’t have to strain their necks,” Harry said to Chris, still laughing. Chris nodded and the two walked over. The girl sitting in his favorite chair jumped out and Harry took it. “Sorry I laughed at you,” he said to the girl who had spoken, “but you couldn’t have been more wrong.”

“Why?” she asked perplexed. “You three have always been best friends and she’s good at helping people learn spells.”

Harry smiled and shook his head, “We weren’t friends yet and she was, in the words of Ron, ‘a nightmare.’ She was the worst kind of know-it-all and she made sure everyone knew it.” He stopped and shook his head at the memories. “That Charms class, Flitwick had introduced us to the incantation of the Levitating Charm. We had been practicing the wand movement for a week or two, but this was the first day that we would try to get a feather to rise. Ron tried a few times but couldn’t get it to work. Hermione told him in her bossiest voice exactly what he was doing wrong. ‘You’re saying it wrong. It’s Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the ‘gar’ nice and long.’” Everyone started to laugh at Harry’s impression.

“That’s what she sounded like too. Ron snapped and told her to do it if she was so smart. Of course, she did, and she was the only one to manage it that day. Ron was so annoyed by the end of class. As we were walking to our next class, Ron started to complain about her. He called her a nightmare and said that she didn’t have any friends.”

“That wasn’t very nice,” the girl who had first interrupted said. Harry thought her name was Vani, but he wasn’t sure.

“No, but it was the brutal truth,” Harry said with a shrug. “Even Hermione will admit that she was bad those first two months. It was our luck that she was right behind us and heard everything he said, and all the laughs it brought. She pushed past us and went to a bathroom to cry. Well, we didn’t know that at the time and I think it’s the only time Hermione has willingly missed classes.” He stopped putting everything in order.

“We went to the feast and Lavender told us that she was in the bathroom crying. It was a good feast, the house elves out did themselves as they always do.” Harry grimaced as he thought about their Dark Arts teacher. “Professor Quirrell was the Dark Arts teacher that year and he came running into the room screaming about some troll in the dungeon.”

“So that’s true!” the first girl said. “I thought Parvati was just trying to tease me.”

“Oh yeah, it’s true,” Harry said ruefully. “As we were walking up to the common room I remembered that Hermione was in a bathroom crying. I made Ron turn back with me and we went to find her. As we were walking we noticed this odour. Nothing has ever come close to that smell. The troll walked into the corridor and into a room. We hurried over and locked the door triumphantly.” Harry stopped with a smile.

“I thought you said Ron knocked him out,” Chris said accusingly.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll get to that,” Harry said with a small laugh. “We were going to head back, when we were stopped by a high pitched scream. We realized two things quite quickly. One, that room was the girl’s bathroom. And two, Hermione was locked in there with the troll.”

“What did you do?” the girl he thought was Vani asked.

“Hush, Cassandra, let him tell the story,” one of the fourth years commanded sternly.

“We rushed back, threw open the door, and saw Hermione shrinking against a wall. The troll was advancing on her, knocking off sinks as

he went.” Harry stopped and tried to stop the fit a laughter that was threatening to erupt.

“That’s not funny,” the bossy fourth year told him.

“It wasn’t then, but it is now,” Harry told her. “Ron and I started to scream at it to confuse it. The troll looked around, saw me, and decided that it wanted to go after me instead. Ron shouted something at it and threw a pipe at it. It didn’t notice the pipe hit him, but he looked at Ron because he heard the yell. I ran to Hermione and tried to get her to move. She was frozen solid from fright.”

“Is this when Ron knocked him out?” Chris asked excitedly.

“No, I’m getting there,” Harry said with a laugh. “The troll was very confused and because of that it was very angry. It went after Ron, but Ron couldn’t escape. I then did the stupidest or bravest thing I have ever done; it all depends on how you look at it. I jumped onto the troll’s back”

“You did what?” the bossy fourth year asked, completely surprised.

“Be quiet, Lara,” Cassandra chided her.

“I take it you think it was rather stupid,” Harry asked her. She nodded and Harry laughed. “I would have to agree. The troll didn’t feel me on his neck, but he did notice my wand up his nose and he went berserk. He was trying to club me or snatch me off when Ron pulled out his own wand and cast the greatest Wingardium Leviosa I’ve ever seen. The troll’s club floated ten or so feet into the air and then fell on it’s skull with a gross crunch. The troll fell flat on its face and I pulled my bugger covered wand out of his nose.”

“Did you get in trouble?” the only girl who hadn’t said anything asked.

“Professor McGonagall, Snape, and Quirrell came into the room soon after. She started yelling at us when Hermione told her first lie,” Harry said proudly. “Not that I endorse lying to teachers, but a good lie can save some house points. She told them that she had run off to battle the troll and that we had come to find her. She lost her first, and I

think almost only, points, and Ron and I won five points each. We've been best friends ever since and I couldn't ask for better ones."

"When did she lose other points?" Cassandra asked when she was sure he was finished.

Harry smiled and thought of Norbert. "Well that same year—"

The common room door slammed open and a very angry looking Madam Pomfrey stormed in. "Mr. Potter would you care to tell me what time it is?" Harry swallowed a smile and stood up. He felt his height would better serve him if he stood and towered over her.

"I'm guessing that it's past seven," he said calmly.

"Yes, could you please tell me the exact time!" she snapped at him. Harry glanced at his watch and was surprised to see that it was past eight.

"Eight twenty," he paused and counted the minutes, "three exactly."

"And what time were you supposed to come up to the hospital wing so that I could change that bandage?" she asked angrily.

"At exactly seven thirty," Harry said bending his head down. Playing meek usually got her happy.

"Exactly, now explain why I am here and you are not there!" she commanded him.

"Quite simple," Harry told her, "I was telling these wonderful Gryffindors about the troll in the dungeons my first year and how Ron used a Levitating Charm to knock it out."

"You did what!" she yelled at him. "You will give them ideas and I'll be taking care of them next, Mr. Potter. It's bad enough that you spend so much time in my wing, but encouraging others in your footsteps? Tsk, tsk."

“Oh well, it’s a good thing you arrived then,” Harry said thankfully. “I was just about to tell them about baby Norbert.”

“Who’s baby Norbert?” she asked warily.

“Oh, he was our pet dragon back in first year,” Harry explained absently.

“You had a dragon?” she asked faintly.

“Yeah,” Harry said rolling his eyes as if dragons were common pets. The five students were staring at him in awe and Madam Pomfrey looked as if she was about to faint. “Don’t you remember that nasty bite Ron had first year? He was in the hospital wing for several days.” He ushered her out of the common room and up to the infirmary. He let her bandage his arm and he headed back to the common room without her.

He spent the next several hours telling them about Norbert, the Deathday Party, blowing up Aunt Marge, Draco Malfoy the Amazing Bouncing Ferret, Ron’s dress robes, detention with Umbridge, and, for Chris’s sake, the sheer genius that was the Weasley twins’ good-bye gift to the school.

He went to bed in the first year’s dorm late that night. He had to admit, no matter how rough life had been, he had always had something to laugh about.

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Night Before Christmas

If I could be like that
I would give anything
Just to live one day in those shoes.
If I could be like that
What would I do?
3 Doors Down: Be Like That

Harry arrived at the Burrow the next morning late. He had had such a bad night, what with the nightmares and all, that he had gone down to the common room to sleep. He didn't want to disturb Chris's sleep; unfortunately, Dobby was cleaning so Harry stayed up talking with the house elf. It was almost dawn when he fell asleep, only to be awoken several hours later by the other Gryffindors. He hurried to get dressed and went to breakfast with them, though he made them all late. He then had to get his bandage changed, but he was late for that again and had to put up with Madame Pomfrey's yelling and scolding. It was this that had set him back the farthest and Harry was happy to be away from Hogwarts and encased in the relative calm of the Burrow.

Ginny hurried outside; she had been watching the yard for an hour and a half. "You had better hurry up and get inside, Harry," she said worriedly. "Mum's worked herself into a worry tantrum and the sooner you get inside the better."

"It's nice to see you too, Gin," Harry said hugging her. She laughed at him and hugged him back. Thia rolled her eyes and headed inside.

"Sorry, luv, but the sooner she gets it out of her system the better off we'll all be," she said, leaning up to kiss him hello.

"Ginny, let him come inside," Bill's angry voice floated to them. "Mum's frantic."

"I love it how your brothers all think that the kisses are your idea," Harry told her with a laugh. "I'm going to have to remember that if they try to lynch me again." She hit him in the stomach and Harry doubled over.

“Ginny,” Ron’s voice shouted at them. “Get him inside and stop abusing him. He just got out of the hospital.” Ginny helped Harry walk up to the house and Harry tried to recover. “And you thought you got a good girl, Harry,” Ron told him with a smirk. “She’s been cheating like that for years.” Harry smiled at him weakly. They walked into the kitchen and Mrs. Weasley overwhelmed Harry.

“Oh, Harry, dear,” she said hugging him. “I was so worried that something had happened to you and Thia when you both didn’t arrive on time. I couldn’t stop thinking of all the possibilities. I wondered if something had happened with your burnt arm and you needed to stay another day or if you had another vision and you stayed to talk about it to the Headmaster. And then I worried that Hogwarts was attacked and you were stuck there. I’m so glad you and Thia are all right. Merlin, what I would have done if something had happened to you!”

“Molly, dear,” Mr. Weasley said, prying her arms off of him. “Let the boy breathe. He’s fine and he’s here. No use telling him what went through your mind these past few minutes.”

Harry rubbed his sore ribs and smiled at her. “I’m fine, Mrs. Weasley. I just stayed up too late last night and then didn’t get up on time. And then I got Madame Pomfrey mad and she yelled at me for about an hour.” Thia started laughing as if that was the funniest thing in the world. Harry glared at her. “It wasn’t that funny,” he grumbled.

“You were trying so hard to calm her down and get out of there on time,” she said laughing. “But it only made her angrier. If you would have kept your mouth shut she would have let you out on time.” Harry just glared at her.

“Want to play a game of chess?” Ron asked in the pause that followed.

“Only if Gin plays for me,” Harry said, smiling at his girlfriend. She nodded and they went into the living room. Hermione sat on Ron’s armrest and Ginny sat on Harry’s.

“So, why’d you stay up late?” Hermione asked curiously.

“Oh just chatting to some nice girls,” Harry answered casually. Ginny hit him over the head and Harry laughed at her pout. “You know what? If you keep abusing me, I’m going to dump you.” Ginny stuck her tongue out at him and hit him over the head again. “I didn’t even do anything to deserve that.”

“And who were these girls?” Ginny asked in a huff.

“Well, one was a pretty brown-haired girl named Vani. Another was a beautiful bossy girl named Emma. One girl was rather loud, but she had the cutest nose. Her name was Cassandra. And the last one was shy but she was sweet and her name was Anne.” Ginny stared at him with her mouth wide open. Ron was about to jump the table to kill the cheating boy, when Hermione started to laugh.

“You do like them young, Harry,” she said with a laugh. “Those were four of the five people who stayed for break, right?”

“Yeah, and they weren’t nearly as beautiful or bossy as my Ginevra,” Harry said, hugging the girl in question; she just hit him over the head again for using her full name. “The boy, Chris, was a first year and he was pretty nice. He was having problems with Wingardium Leviosa though.”

Ron and Hermione started laughing, but Ginny gave them an odd look. Ron proceeded to tell them the story and she laughed too.

“I must say that I told it better,” Harry said as Ginny captured Ron’s knight.

Ron spit out the hot chocolate he’d just drunk and stared at Harry. “You told them that story?”

“Yep and a few others,” he said absently. “Your wonderful dress robes and baby Norbert. There are others, I just don’t remember which ones.”

“You told them about my dress robes?” Ron asked incredulous. He moved his other knight.

"Yeah and Charlotte got a kick out of that one," Harry said as he moved one of his pawns to capture Ron's last knight. "Where's Sephra?"

"Blaise and Edlyn where at school, so she wanted to stay with them," Ginny answered him. "Which was fine with me, 'cause my room was packed with Hermione, Tonks, her, and me in it."

"Yeah, well, at least you have your room," Ron said complaining. "Hermione's parents kicked me out of mine."

"And what's wrong with that?" Hermione said in a huff. "They needed a place to stay and you were the only person not sharing a room already." Harry laughed as Ron tried to calm her down.

"Was Sephra alright?" Harry asked Ginny quietly.

"Yeah, she only had surface wounds," she informed him. "It looked worse than it actually was. That's why she went to Hogsmeade with us the next day."

"Are Hermione's parents still here?" Harry asked softly, smiling at his fighting friends. He could tell that they were actually flirting in their own special way.

"Yeah," she told him. "They cancelled their plans, saying that Hermione's best friend was in the hospital with serious injuries. You were in a car crash on Friday." Harry smiled at her. "They'll stay for Christmas and a few days after that, but they need to get back to work." Harry nodded and held Ginny's hand, glad to be back with his friends.

They spent the afternoon playing chess, and watching the snowstorm that had started soon after Harry had arrived. Everyone was sitting in the living room after supper, talking in small groups.

"So, Harry, what's this extra training Ginny was telling us about?" Ron asked after awhile.

"I'm going to learn from some friends of Thia's," Harry replied quietly. "Dumbledore and I agreed that I needed more training."

"You don't have any free time as it is, Harry," Hermione said worriedly. "How are you going to fit in more training?"

"I'm dropping some classes," he told them.

"You're dropping classes?" Hermione asked loudly and frantically. Everyone turned to look at them and Harry just about hit her. Sometimes she had such a loud mouth. Harry knew he was in for it.

"Why are you dropping classes?" Mrs. Weasley asked in a motherly-I-think-you-aren't-thinking-about-your-future tone of voice. Harry glanced at Thia, but she just shrugged; something her brother noticed.

"And what did you have to do with it, Synthia?" Remus asked her in a brotherly-I-think-you-stuck-your-nose-in-where-it-doesn't-belong tone of voice. Harry hoped that Dumbledore wouldn't mind him telling everyone, because he was going to anyway.

"Because I needed room in my schedule for more Defense Against the Dark Arts training," Harry answered semi-truthfully. He didn't think healing counted as Defense, but that was his purpose for learning it.

"And what does Synthia have to do with this?" Remus asked angrily. Harry had never heard him call her that once, let alone twice.

"Bugger off, Remus," she said just as angrily. "You have no right to be angry about this."

"I think I do, Synthia," Remus said shortly.

"Don't call me 'Synthia,'" she yelled at him. "Only mum got away with that and the last time I checked she was dead and you aren't her!" Remus looked at her angrily for a second longer before her words sunk in.

“Don’t you dare use that excuse, Thia,” he said quietly, trying to control his temper. “Don’t you dare.” There was a long staring contest as everyone else sat embarrassed by the topic of the fight.

“And why not, Remus John Lupin? She was my mum too and I have never let you or dad or Lily or Sirius or any teacher call me that willingly,” she said in a quiet dangerous tone. Remus looked at her angrily and then he noticed everyone for what seemed like the first time.

“Not now, Thia,” he said quietly. “Not now.”

“And why not now, Remus?” she yelled at him. Harry knew that Remus was in trouble. “You’re the one who made a big deal about it in front of everyone. You’re the one who called my Synthia.” She walked up to him and stopped right in front of him. She was several inches shorter, but she had spent all of her adult life fighting against the Dark Arts and had a presence about her.

“You want to have this fight now?” he asked not stepping down. “Fine! We’ll have it now! We’ll embarrass the shit out of everyone, but if it’ll make you happy, Synthia, then we’ll talk about it now!” Thia didn’t step down and everyone wished at that moment that they were anywhere but in this room with the two very dangerous fighting siblings. Harry wanted to leave, but Thia and Remus were standing right in front of the door, so he couldn’t. “But then let’s bring up where you’ve been the past fifteen years and what happened to the child!”

Harry watched as Thia visibly shrank back from him for a moment. What child? Then she steeled her resolve and shouted back at him. “I’ve told you that I can’t answer that question! Dumbledore would just about kill me if I did! I took that assignment saying that I’d never tell another living soul. And that basically meant you, Remus, since. Seeing that Sirius was in Azkaban, Lily was dead, Sam was dead, James was dead, and Peter was a filthy traitor. I made that promise and I’m not breaking it!” She stopped and glanced around the room. “As for the child.” She stopped and her body was racked by a sob. “It died that November, right before I went undercover,” she answered quietly. She paused for a second and started yelling again. “But that’s not the point of this conversation, Remus, and you know it!”

Remus stood opposite her completely stunned. Finally he opened his mouth and asked her, "And what is this about?"

She shook her head and just about hit him. Harry didn't think anyone else noticed that, but he had been training with her for four months now and saw the faint twitch of her shoulder. Remus noticed it and backed away from her. Harry knew she was about to blow a fuse, so he got up and stepped in front of her.

"Thia, get some control," Harry said calmly. "He didn't mean to make you angry." She looked at Harry and then took a deep breath. She held it and then let it go slowly. "Ok, I think that's enough of this conversation," Harry told them both. "I'm not sure what just happened, but you guys are adults and should act that way once in a while." Thia smiled at him weakly, as did Remus. "Ok, all better? Good."

Harry took his seat by Ginny and looked around at everyone. "I'm pretty sure this conversation was grilling me on why I dropped two classes."

"You dropped two," Hermione scolded him.

"And I'm picking up three, so I think it's a pretty fair trade," Harry said with a shrug.

"Potions and what other class?" Ron asked. "I wished I could drop Potions."

"I didn't drop Potions," Harry said softly. "It's not so bad this year, what with Snape ignoring every Gryffindor. And I'm hoping to see Malfoy lose some points."

"Never will happen," Ron said in disbelief.

"I'm not so sure," Harry told him logically. "Snape doesn't have to kiss up to the Malfoy's any more. Did you know that Draco got an A on his potions O.W.L.'s?"

"And how do you know that?" Mrs. Weasley asked sternly.

"I'm not giving out my sources," Harry said carefully. "I worked hard getting them." Mrs. Weasley stared at him for a second longer, but relented.

"So, what classes are you dropping?" Fred asked after a short pause.

"Herbology and Charms," Harry answered quickly.

"And what classes are you going to take, exactly, and who is going to teach you?" Remus asked, his voice still sounding angry. Harry noticed that Thia also picked up on it, so he watched them both warily.

"A healing class, a class from a Spell Master, and a..." he stammered, thinking as he paused, This ain't magic.

"And a physical trainer," Thia answered for him. "They're people I know from around and we're hoping that they'll be willing to train Harry for us."

"But why would he need training?" the unfamiliar voice of Mrs. Granger asked. Harry winced visibly. The only ones who understood why were Remus, Thia, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Everyone, though, saw the wince and the look of hopelessness pass over his face. After a quick second it was gone from his face, but it took Ginny squeezing his hand to bring his mind from the Prophecy.

Harry looked at Remus and Thia. He wanted to tell these people, but he didn't know if he should. Thia looked spit between the two options and Remus looked worried. "Because," Harry finally replied evasively.

"Because why, Harry?" Tonks added sternly. He was surprised by her tone of voice and almost told them about the Prophecy.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I can't say, not without talking to Professor Dumbledore first." Remus swore loudly, and everyone except Tonks and Thia looked at him surprised. Harry had never heard Remus swear before.

"I'm sick of Dumbledore and his secrets!" he yelled. "He makes best friends and family members keep secrets from those they love! I'm sick and tired of it. Sometimes I just want to wash my hands of him and leave! But I can't not fight; I've got to do something!" Tonks walked over to him and put a calming hand on his arm. He sighed deeply and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Don't worry," Harry said quietly. "There are more than a few times when I feel the same way." The two men looked at each other and understood each other perfectly.

"Should I?" Harry asked quietly.

"Why not?" Remus replied just as quietly. "It's your secret, your battle, your war."

"What are you talking about?" Fred muttered angrily.

"Stop speaking in riddles!" George yelled exasperated.

"But that's the problem," Harry said. "It is a riddle of sorts. A very important riddle that we have figured out except for the most important part."

"Harry, just tell them," Ginny chided him. "That is if you are going to. If not, I'd run and not stop running because the twins look murderous." Harry smiled at her.

"But they can't actually kill me," he told her logically. "And either must die at the hand of the other. They can beat me 'til I'm millimeters from death, but they can't actually kill me."

"Harry," Hermione said sadly, "that is the most pessimistic thing I've ever heard."

"But it's true and you can't deny it," Harry told her. She tried to stare him down, but she had to admit it was and that she had thought of it a long time ago.

"How long have you known that?" Remus asked him.

"Um," he counted the months out on his fingers. "About six months now. I figured it out when I was at the Dursley's." Remus looked at him sorrowfully and shook his head.

"You know what I hate most about this?" Fred asked turning to George.

"No, what?" George asked mockingly.

"That, while they all know," he replied, motioning vaguely at the room, "and this conversation makes sense to them, it makes no sense to us, because we have no idea what they're talking about."

"You know now that you---"

"The one with the power," Harry said interrupting them with a tired voice, "to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have the power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies." There was complete silence when he was finished. Ginny hugged him closer and Harry leaned into the embrace, hoping for the strength to look at his adopted family.

"I didn't know that there was more to that," Mr. Weasley finally said. Harry looked at him surprised and then looked at Remus and Thia for an explanation.

"Dumbledore told everyone the little Voldemort knew before your fifth year," Remus said quietly. "That way everyone understood what they were protecting. I guess he didn't make it clear enough that there was more." Harry laughed bitterly and then blushed.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I'm going to bed." He got up and left the room silently. He managed to get to up the first three steps before they responded to his exit.

"Harry James Potter, get yourself back in this room this very moment," Molly Weasley's voice screeched at him. He almost continued walking, but he considered her as a second mum and so he couldn't ignore her like that. He turned around and stood by the door. Everyone could tell he was ready to flee the moment he felt like it. "How long have you known that?"

"Since the Ministry fiasco," he answered, his voice filled with sorrow as he remembered that night.

"He told you that right after Sirius died?" Charlie asked surprised.

"Yeah, well, I would have rather heard it sooner, but, you know, what can you change?" Harry said bitterly. "I'm glad he told me then, because if he hadn't he would have come up with one more reason not to."

"That's what had you down all summer," Tonks said thoughtfully, "and why you were angry at Dumbledore." Harry nodded. "Well, I'd have blown things up if I had been you." Harry looked at his shoes embarrassed. "You did, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't blow things up exactly," Harry said slowly. "But I did manage to trash his office." Tonks smiled and Harry felt a little better. "Look, I'd rather not talk about that part. I've forgiven Dumbledore for it and talking about it only brings the bitterness back."

"You called it a riddle," Bill reminded him. "Why?"

"But he will have the power the Dark Lord knows not." Harry repeated. "That's the riddle. What the hell does Voldemort not know?"

"Harry Potter, do not use language like that!" Mrs. Weasley scolded him.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said. "He did know of the magic my mum used to save me the first time around, but he didn't think of it at the time. I can't figure out what this power is."

“And either must die,” Fred repeated softly, “at the hand of the other...”

“...for neither can live while the other survives,” Harry finished for him. “Yeah, that’s the part that particularly sucks about it.”

Harry glanced around the room. Ginny was perched at the edge of the sofa ready to leap up and hug him. Ron was holding Hermione close to him, not letting her go. Mr. Weasley looked proudly at Harry; Harry couldn’t figure out why he was so proud. Mrs. Wesley was shocked and couldn’t get her mouth working. Both Grangers seemed at a loss; Harry didn’t blame them, he was too when he first heard. Harry had never seen the twins more somber or serious; he wished he never had to again. Bill looked thoughtful and Harry guessed he was trying to figure the riddle out; he liked that kind of thing. Charlie was looking from Ginny to Harry back and forth quickly; Harry knew that he was thinking of the danger Ginny was in as his girlfriend. Tonks had sat down hard next to Remus and was staring at Harry in disbelief; she had let her looks change back to those she had been born with. Remus held on to her, but watched Harry carefully. Thia was the closest to him, but she wasn’t looking at him; they had talked about this the most and she knew just about everything he thought about it.

“And you just accept it?” Mr. Granger finally asked. “Just because someone gave that prophecy, you believe it?” Harry looked at the man he hardly knew. He had just asked Harry one of the questions Thia didn’t know the answer to and one Harry had hardly answered to himself. He thought about the answer carefully before he gave it.

Everyone watched as the boy before them thought about that question. The saddest thing was that none of them was thinking of him as a boy, but as a man. He looked like one and held himself like one. First a look of confusion passed over his face. He brushed his hair back with his hand and when they could see his face again the look was replaced with one of sorrow. Shortly a look of longing filled his eyes. It was quickly removed by a look of hope and then one of determination.

"I accept it not because Trelawney gave it," Harry finally answered. "But because I'm willing to make it happen." He stopped looking for the words he wanted. "I never had," he started but broke off. He had to calm himself down before he could continue.

"I never had," he started again, closing his eyes so he didn't need to see the looks he knew he would get, "the greatest of childhoods. I never had it all before. I'm used to waking up in the morning, hoping for more and getting nothing. I met Ron and Hermione and for years I've listened to them talk about their parents and their childhoods and I've always wanted one just like it. But I never got that chance because Voldemort killed my parents." He stopped and took a slow, shuddering breath.

"I decided back in September that I'd fight him," Harry said finishing his answer. "Not to get revenge, because that's a stupid reason. I decided that I'd fight for everyone who had never been affected by war or murder or Voldemort, so they'd never have to experience it." He opened his eyes and they were surprised at the amount of hope in them. "So that if someday I have a family, my kids won't have to grow up fearing Voldemort. I'm going to fight and I'm going to learn as much as I can so that I can win it in the end. I'll do it so that my kids and Ron's and Hermione's and everyone else's kids can have the childhood I've wanted all my life." Harry turned and walked slowly up to the twins' room where he was sleeping. He barely made it up three stairs when Ginny attached herself to him, crying her eyes out. Mrs. Weasley and Hermione joined her soon after.

Harry let them cry, but all he wanted to do at the moment was sleep. The time passed and Harry knew he had to do something because Hermione had latched herself to his left side and his burn was in excruciating pain.

"Why is it that I always make the girls cry?" Harry asked the watching guys. They laughed and the three women let go of him. Harry lifted his arm up and saw blood on the bandage.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione said, starting to cry again.

"Don't be, Hermione," he said quietly. "You're not the person who should be. The person who should will never feel pity, ever." He turned to walk up the stairs to bed.

"Mr. Potter," Mrs. Weasley said sternly through the last of her tears. "That bandage needs to be changed before you go to bed." Harry nodded and followed her into the kitchen. He sat patiently as she fussed over him and then walked down the hall. He tried to ignore the looks most of them gave him, but it didn't work.

"Look, I didn't tell you guys that so you'd be sorry for me," he said angrily. "Just back off and stop pitying me." They looked at him with surprise and then quickly looked away, feeling uncomfortable. As Harry walked back up the first three stairs he heard his name being called.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley said again. Harry turned and looked at one of the few people whose face didn't show pity. "I'm glad you're the one to fulfill that Prophecy, because you'll do it right." Harry looked letting some surprise show on his face before he smiled.

"Thanks Mr. Weasley," Harry replied from the bottom of his heart.

"I meant what I told Vol-Voldemort back in September," he told Harry solemnly. "I meant every word." Harry nodded in understanding and turned back up the stairs.

Once in the room he quickly changed into pajamas. He slid under the covers of the bed he was to use and let out a sigh. He didn't know if he should have told them, but now that he had, he was glad. It was a weight off his shoulders. He wondered what it would be like if the whole world knew about it.

He shook his head. No, he didn't want that. Not yet at least. Maybe in a couple months or when Voldemort found out about it. He sure hoped that he could back up what he had just said. He wanted to live and he wanted that family. He shut his eyes, hoping once again for a dreamless sleep, but expecting the worst because that's the way his life went.

“Are you willing to do everything and anything your Lord commands?” Lucius’ impressive figure asked a bowing form. Lucius was the only recognizable face; the other faces surrounding him were covered with masks. A smaller figure in black robes was bowing in front of Lucius. He had his forehead touching the ground and Harry could only see the top of his head, gleaming whitely in the faint light.

“I am more than will to do everything and anything that my Lord commands,” Draco’s sneering voice replied.

“Are you willing to give your life to eradicate all mudbloods, their sympathizers, and muggles?” Lucius asked solemnly.

“I am willing to carry out the noble work of the Dark Lord at any cost, including my life.” Harry felt Voldemort’s satisfaction with Draco’s oaths of fidelity.

“Are you willing to kill, torture, and devastate any and all of your Lord’s enemies?” The room they were in was large and very dark. Harry seemed to be on some platform of sorts and was lounging carelessly in a throne-like chair.

“I am willing to kill, torture, and devastate all of my Lord’s enemies,” Draco replied earnestly. Harry couldn’t believe that Draco was taking this oath already. He wasn’t even an adult yet.

“Step forward to take the final oath,” Lucius instructed him. Voldemort stood and Draco shuffled forward on his knees. Harry saw the slight fear in Draco’s eyes, but he was keeping himself under control. Voldemort grabbed the boy’s left arm and pulled him up roughly.

“Do you swear on pain of death, to loyally and completely serve, obey, and please me?” Voldemort asked the boy roughly.

“I swear on pain of death to loyally and completely serve, obey, and please you, my Lord,” Draco answered with the slightest of tremble in his voice.

“Look me in the eye, boy.” Draco looked up into Voldemort’s red eyes. “Legilimens!” Harry watched as Voldemort plucked through Draco’s

mind. Harry was surprised to see how much hate and jealousy the boy felt for him. On the outside it seemed that Draco had the better life, but the boy was actually jealous of Harry. Harry also couldn't help but notice how organized it was compared to Wormtail's. Harry wondered if Draco knew Occlumency.

"Very well," Voldemort said, dropping the boy. "I will allow you to have some fun with Mr. Potter when he visits us. Give me your arm, Draco Malfoy," Voldemort finished ceremoniously.

Draco raised his arm and Voldemort pressed his wand to his bare white forearm. "Morsmordre!" Harry winced in pain as Draco screamed in agony. The smell of burnt flesh rose to Harry's nostrils and made him feel ill. Harry was also sickened by the joy Voldemort felt at causing this pain, even in so loyal a follower.

When Draco stopped screaming, Voldemort removed his wand and turned to face the assembled Death Eaters. "We have a new brother, my faithful Death Eaters. Please welcome him." There was a brief pause as a few mumbled a hello to the boy. "Bring the child out," Voldemort commanded. They dragged a young girl out, no more than seven in age. Harry felt his stomach heave as he looked at her face. There was no skin covering it; he could plainly see the muscle tissue beneath it.

"I have been told that you have been instructed in the three golden spells," Voldemort expressed to Draco. "I would like you to show me your abilities with them." Draco nodded and strode forward to the girl. "Start with the Imperius and then the Cruciatus. Finish with Avada Kedavra."

Draco nodded. "Imperio!" Harry watched as the girl twisted her body into gross contortions. She was tying herself into a knot. There was coarse laughter from those watching and Harry wished he could see Draco's face.

"Very good," Voldemort said finally.

"Crucio!" The girl, still tied up, fell to the ground writhing in agony. Harry could tell the position of her limbs was causing more pain for

her. Harry winced inside Voldemort's mind when he heard several sickening pops as her joints gave out. The time seemed to last an eternity, but Harry knew it couldn't have been more than a few minutes.

"Very good," Voldemort finally said. Harry could feel his glee and pride in the boy. "Kill her." Draco nodded and raised his wand. Harry heard the most unforgivable of words leave his mouth.

"Avada Kedavra!" The girl stopped twitching the second the green light hit her body.

"Noooooooooooooooooooo!" Harry screamed, sitting up in his bed. He heard footsteps on the stairs and in rushed everybody that could fit. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were the first ones in, followed closely by Remus and Thia. Harry tried to calm his breathing down and warm up; he was soaked in cold sweat.

"What's the matter, Harry?" Ron asked worriedly by his side. Ginny had sat on his bed and was stroking his hair, trying to calm him. Hermione sat at the foot of it and looked at him with loving worry.

"You get one guess," Harry said shakily.

"Voldemort," Ginny answered knowingly. Harry nodded. "What did you see this time?" she asked, just as she always did. Ron and Hermione were surprised when all Harry did was sigh and lie back down. Had either of them asked, they were sure Harry would have erupted.

"I'm not telling anyone the first part," Harry said softly, looking Ginny in the eyes pleading with her to understand. She nodded. "But Voldemort had one of his Death Eaters," he said giving himself a slight shake; he still couldn't believe Draco had taken the Mark, "control, torture, and kill a little girl to prove their competency with the three Unforgivables." That little girl hadn't stood a chance and Draco had just killed her. He didn't just kill her but terrify the girl and torture her as well.

“Why do children’s deaths affect you so much?” Remus asked cautiously. Harry thought about it slowly. Why did they?

“Because they don’t stand a chance,” Harry answered. “Because they aren’t a threat. Because they more than likely didn’t choose to fight in this war, they just got caught in the middle. I don’t even think that girl was magical,” he said thinking about her. “She was wearing what was definitely a muggle nightgown.”

“How do you know that?” Hermione asked curiously.

“It had a Barbie on it,” Harry replied. Hermione nodded, while the magical folks gave them confused looks. “That’s a Muggle doll,” Harry told them. “What time is it?”

“Eleven,” Ginny answered. Harry fought back the urge to swear. He had gone to bed less than thirty minutes ago. It had seemed like hours.

“I’m going back to sleep,” Harry finally said. Everyone heard the dismissal in his voice and they left. Before she exited the room, Ginny gave him one last look of loving support.

Harry spent the rest of the night turning and tossing. He wanted to ask Ron to hit him over the head and knock him out, but he didn’t want to wake him. He couldn’t shake the nightmares this night and knew better than to get up early this morning. He’d wait until Ron woke before getting up, so he wouldn’t arouse suspicion or worry. That should be earlier than normal, because Ron could never wait long to open gifts.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Newest Addition

God bless the ruler of this house,
And send him long to reign.
And many a merry Christmas live to see again
Among your friends and kindred
That live both far and near.
Last Stanza of "God Rest Ye, Merrye Hippogriffs"

Harry heard Ron stirring; he was finally waking up. Harry shut his eyes and feigned sleep. He didn't want Ron and the others to know that he had slept little that night. As he lay there with his eyes closed he heard Ron jump out of bed and quietly walk over to Harry.

"Wake up, Harry!" Ron shouted in his ear. "It's Christmas!" The twins threw pillows at the boy and slid out of their beds lazily. "Where're the gifts?" Ron cried, frantically searching the room for the normal pile of gifts. "They aren't anywhere!"

A laugh came from the door and Ginny stepped in with Hermione. "Didn't you hear mum last night, Ron? She said we're all opening them down stairs this year, just like we used to until basically everyone was at Hogwarts."

"Oh," Ron said, the panic draining away, allowing his ears to turn a bright red. The girls went downstairs and the boys followed. Bill and Charlie were already up and had taken seats at the couch. Overnight a Christmas tree decorated for the season had been set-up in front of the main window in the room.

"G-good morning," Bill said trying, but failing, to stifle a yawn.

"Who decorated?" Ginny asked her brothers.

"We di-id," Charlie answered her with a huge yawn. Harry noticed that all the decorations were up around the house. Garlands hung from the windows and doorways. There were stockings hung on the fireplace and Harry noticed a piece of mistletoe in the far corner.

They heard sounds from the kitchen and Ron went to investigate. "It's mum, Tonks, Thia, Mrs. Granger, and Melissa cooking breakfast. We just need the guys to get-up to start opening the gifts." Ron turned to sprint up the stairs but Bill stopped him.

"You're not even going to look in your stocking?" Bill asked, laughing. Ron turned around and leapt towards the fireplace. Charlie caught him before he fell into the fire itself.

"Hold on there, little brother," he said, laughing. "They aren't going anywhere." Ron pulled out of Charlie's grasp and grabbed his stocking. Ginny and the twins joined him along with Bill and Charlie. Hermione and Harry hung back, feeling just a little left out.

"Aren't you guys going to look at your stockings?" Ron asked incredulously. Harry realized that the other three stockings had his, Hermione's and Melissa's (Bill's girlfriend) names on them. He took his down and went through its contents. There were some chocolates, two nice quills, a few cheaper toys (which completely amused the twins), and a small book with funny quotes. Everyone seemed to get basically the same thing.

Melissa entered the room and smiled at Bill. She walked over and took her own stocking down. "Thanks, Billy," she said to him. The twins went crazy with laughter. Bill's ears and face went slightly red, but Harry couldn't tell if it was from embarrassment or anger.

Before Bill could attack the twins, Mrs. Weasley and the other ladies walked in. "Is your father still in bed?" Mrs. Weasley asked, dumbfounded. "Someone go wake him and the others up." Ron sprinted up the stairs and started pounding on doors. Harry had to smile; Ron got so worked up over gifts.

"I wrapped your gifts for you, luv," Ginny whispered in his ear. He smiled down at her and hugged her.

"Thanks, Gin," he whispered back. "Did you manage to find yours?" She shook her head in disappointment. "Good, because I'm going to give it to you later."

“Luv, you can’t do that,” she scolded him. “Everyone gives their gifts at the same time.” Harry blushed; he’d never live this gift down then. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Harry lied. “I have to go get it though.” Harry headed back up the stairs and searched through his trunk for the small box her gift was in. He had wrapped it back at Hogwarts before break had started. He didn’t want Ginny to find out about it early.

“Is everyone here?” Mrs. Weasley asked once Harry had arrived back downstairs.

“Yes,” Ron said hurriedly. “Get in here, Harry!” Harry slowed down and took his time putting the gift under the tree. “Harry, I’m gonna kill you!”

“You can’t,” Harry joked. He saw a few shadows pass over faces, but he ignored them.

“Ok, Ginny, you hand out the gifts,” Mr. Weasley told his youngest.

“I think Bill should have to,” she argued sweetly with her dad. “He hasn’t had to in ages. Since Charlie was three or so.”

“I think Harry should,” Bill said before his father agreed with her, as he normally did. “He is after all the newest addition to the family.” Harry looked at them all dumbly. “The tradition is that the youngest, or in your case, the newest addition to the family, hands the gifts out each round.”

Harry watched as a quick look passed between Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and they nodded. “That’s a good idea, Bill,” Mr. Weasley said with a grin. “Harry, you’ll hand them out.”

“What do I do?” Harry asked to Ginny. She laughed and led him to a spot near the tree.

“We’ll sit here and you need to find everyone a gift,” she said, sitting down. He sat next to her and looked at the huge pile. He passed out presents until everyone had one. “Good, now guests open first,

youngest to oldest.” The three Grangers, Melissa, Tonks, Thia, and Remus each opened their gifts in turn. “Ok, now you open yours and then the rest follow in order.”

Harry opened his gift from Remus first. It was a great book about different types of shield magic. Harry had never known so many shields existed. Next, he opened his gift from Ron; he gave Harry the normal stash of chocolate and a great book about seeker moves. Thia gave him a book on dueling technique and Harry knew it was more for teaching the D.A. The Weasleys gave him the normal sweater; this year’s was a deep blue color. Bill and Charlie gave him a pair of slippers. He was about to put them on when he saw the smiles on their faces. He put them aside and was rewarded with their disappointed faces.

“Harry Potter,” Tonks said, laughing at his gift to her and Remus. “Are you trying to tell us something?”

“Well, you know,” he said with a shrug, “you can be kind of dumb at times.” Tonks laughed and threw the book at him. Harry caught it and tossed it back to her.

“I want you to read that,” Harry said seriously, “because as soon as break is over, I’m testing you on it.” He opened Tonks’ gift next and found a huge book on defensive magic. “There’s a test on this I’m guessing.” She nodded. “Ok.”

Charlie loved his dragon and almost hexed Ginny when he discovered her ploy to hide it from him. It seemed that she had become attached to it while Harry was in the hospital. Harry promised himself to buy her an animal the next time he got a chance to.

Hermione got him a bookmark (though he didn’t know why he needed it) and a replacement broom kit. The twins gave him another large stash of WWW stuff, because Dean had “borrowed” his birthday stash and hadn’t bothered to replace it.

He gave Ginny, Ron, and Hermione their gifts next, wishing that everyone wasn’t there to watch. He grabbed the second gift from the Weasleys and waited for his turn to open it.

“Oh, Harry, it’s wonderful,” Hermione said happily. She had Ron put it on and laughed as he blew on the back of her neck. “Thanks.”

He opened his gift after Mr. Granger was finished and looked at it, feeling completely stunned. Sitting in his lap was a clock hand. Ginny smiled and hugged him. “It’s for the family clock,” Mrs. Weasley said with a tear running down her face. “I figured that it was about time you got your own.”

“Thanks,” he said appreciatively; he had never felt more like a Weasley before. He turned to Ginny. “Don’t get the wrong idea about your gift.” He turned and looked at her brothers. “And I’d like to get a chance to explain before you all try to kill me.” They looked at him worriedly as Ginny peeled the paper away with absolute curiosity on her face.

She opened the small jewelry box and gasped. “It’s that ring from the store! I didn’t know you got it!” She wrapped her arms around his neck.

“You got her a ring?” Ron sputtered. Hermione hit Ron, shocked at his insensitivity.

“Let him talk,” she told him quietly.

“It’s actually a ring that belonged to my mum,” Harry said quietly. She looked up at him, surprised. “Remus gave it and its mate to me this summer as my birthday gift. My dad gave it to my mum before they were dating and he told her that he would marry her.” He smiled at her sadly and whispered the rest into her ear. “I can’t give you a promise like that, Gin. But I wanted you to know that you’ve saved my life in many ways and you do mean a lot to me.” She slipped the ring on her right ring finger with a smile and hugged him again.

“I already knew that, luv,” she whispered in his ear. “But thank you, luv.”

Ron opened his gift and realized that it was a part of the same necklace Hermione was wearing. They connected it and noticed that

it was missing a third piece. "Where's the other piece?" Ron asked looking at Harry.

"Right here," he said taking it off. He slipped the thick twisted metal circle into the other two. Harry felt some magic wash over him and looked at the other two curiously.

"Let me see those," Remus said curiously. Harry got up and handed them to him. He examined them slowly. "They have several charms on them. Do you mind if I take a look at them before you put them back on?" Harry shook his head, recognizing the hidden command.

His last gift was from Ginny. He opened it and held it in confusion. It was a book entitled Unfinished Thoughts. There was no author and when he opened it up it was completely blank.

"I thought you needed something to write in," Ginny told him quietly. Harry was startled, and looked at her completely confused. "To write everything down in so that it doesn't overwhelm you." Harry nodded in understanding and kissed her thankfully on the cheek.

"Ginny, open your gift so that I can," Ron told Ginny impatiently as she stared into Harry's eyes.

"Fine," she said irately. She opened her gift from her parents. When Ron had started with his gift, Harry leaned his mouth close to her ear so that she'd be the only one to hear.

"Thanks, Gin," he whispered. "I think I'll try and use it. I hate making you listen to everything."

"That's not why I got it for you, luv," she told him sternly. "I still want to be told everything, but sometimes writing helps more." He nodded again. "Luv, I'm serious. I want you to tell me stuff. How else will I be able to help you?"

"Ok, Gin, I'll try," he promised, hoping that he'd be able to live up to his word.

“Breakfast is ready, everyone,” Mrs. Weasley said, once the gifts were all opened. “Let’s dish up in the kitchen and then anyone out of Hogwarts for more than a year can eat in the dinning room. Everyone else is in the kitchen.”

The twins smiled and nodded in agreement. “Ok, mum,” Fred said happily. “We don’t mind eating with the kiddies one more year.”

“Anyway,” George said carefully. “There’s no adult supervision and all the food’s kept in there.” Everyone laughed and headed to eat. Except for a small food fight the meal went smoothly and the feast tasted as delicious as always. Afterwards, Harry went to get dressed for going outside. Last night’s storm had passed and had left a wonderful amount of snow on the ground.

They spent the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon outside. They had a huge snowball fight that lasted several hours. Fred and George charmed three snowballs to chase Ron around. He spent ten minutes yelling at them (at one point his mother had to yell at him for his choice of words). They didn’t stop until Hermione had pity on Ron and charmed six snowballs to chase the twins. They didn’t out run them and got hit in the head three times each. Everyone laughed as the twins brushed snow out of their ears.

Then they had a competition to see who could build the best igloo without magic. (Fred and George declared themselves the winners, though they used tons of magic.) Ginny made snow angels with Hermione and they spent a lot of the time giggling together. Melissa joined them and the three girls fell to the ground laughing hysterically. Harry, Ron, and Bill eyed them nervously because the three girls kept giving them strange looks.

They even went ice-skating on the pond, which was a first for Harry. It took him a while to learn, in which time he fell on his bum several times. Fred and George loved his shaky skating and would play chicken with him. He always seemed to end up back on his bottom when they had passed. He was beginning to get angry, not only with them, but also with himself, when Ginny and Ron decided to help him out a lot.

"Thanks, you guys," Harry said once he was skating properly. Skating was great, especially with Ginny on his arm. Skating with her gave him a good reason to stay out of the races too. He didn't think he'd be able to stop if he joined one.

"So, did you sleep well after we all left?" Ginny asked him curiously. He didn't really want to answer, but he remembered his promise.

"No, not at all," he replied truthfully. His answer caught her by surprise and she stopped, pulling Harry back. This sudden stop caused Harry to lose balance and fall, bringing Ginny down on top of him.

"Gees," Bill yelled from across the pond. "Can't you guys control yourselves?"

Harry got up shakily with a lot of help from Ginny. He was blushing a deep red and trying to ignore the jokes her brothers were making. Well, all the brothers, but Ron, were making jokes at their expense. "At least they aren't trying to kill you, luv," Ginny said with a smile. "What was so bad about last night?"

"Normal dreams, plus a new one or two from the vision," Harry answered slowly. "I didn't sleep much because of them."

"I'm sorry," she told him softly. She kissed his cheek and continued looking at him. "You don't look so good," she said after awhile.

"Yeah, I don't feel very good either," Harry said in return. "I didn't get a lot of sleep these past two nights, so it's catching up with me."

"I wish you could sleep better," she said thoughtfully. They skated in silence for a little while. He didn't notice it, but Ginny had increased their speed slowly and they were now going quite fast.

She let go of his arm and speed off yelling back at him, "Beat you to the log!" Harry took off after her, but he knew her head start was impossible to beat. As he approached the shore, he tried to stop, but couldn't. He flew through the air and landed in a thankfully soft snowdrift. Harry heard the laughter, but decided to ignore it until he

was out of the drift. There was only one problem with that: he was completely stuck.

Melissa was the only one who noticed his predicament and hurried over to pull him out. She helped steady him and then skated back to Bill, laughing. Harry glared at them and then felt his face betray him. "I'm done," he declared loudly, which only caused more laughter. He sat down and started to un-lace the skates.

Ginny walked over to him with his shoes, her face covered with an impish smile. "Can I have my boots?" Harry asked, knowing the answer.

"What are you going to trade for them?" she asked.

"How about these skates?" he asked holding them up. She shook her head no, so Harry looked around for an idea. He noticed that they were a long distance away from the others. "How about you give them to me and I won't tackle you."

She smiled at him mischievously and started to walk away. Harry got up, his socks getting soaked in the process, and tackled her to the ground. He tried to get his boots, but she held them just out of his reach. "Don't make me tickle you," he warned her quietly, but Ginny just laughed harder. He tried to, but her thick cloak protected her.

Twenty feet away the others watched the two teenagers fight for the boots. At one point Harry had one of them, but Ginny managed to get it back. "Should we be worried?" Charlie asked the others as Harry kept Ginny pinned.

"Nah," Thia answered. "He's good at not hurting those he's tackled, right, Remus?" He nodded stiffly and everyone knew that they were still angry at each other.

"But he's climbing all over her," Charlie stated worriedly.

"And wouldn't you, if she took your boots, Charlie?" Fred argued back. Charlie nodded.

“Then let them play,” George replied. Harry finally got both boots back from her and started to put one on. Ginny quickly grabbed the other one, which he had placed next to him.

“Gin, give that back!” they all heard him shout as she took off running. He leapt up and chased her down. He tackled her, not because he wanted to, but because he lost his balance when his half-tied boot fell off. Ginny laughed and handed him the boot she had. He rolled off her grumpily and started to put it on. She got up and retrieved the other boot for him. He grabbed it roughly out of her hands when she handed it to him.

“Now should we be worried?” Charlie asked as they watched an argument brew.

“Nah,” Hermione said with a shrug. “Ginny’ll win. Harry can’t stay mad at her for long. It’s actually funny to watch them fight.”

“Hot chocolate for anyone who wants it!” Mrs. Weasley’s voice called out over the white landscape.

Harry stomped into the kitchen, passed everyone at the table, and bounded up the stairs. Ginny followed him inside, silently and pensively. Harry heard Ron ask, “Watcha do now, Ginny?”

Harry barged into his room and deposited his outer layers on his bed. He took a look at his ankle once he peeled the last sock off. It was completely swollen and was sprained. His burnt arm was covered in bloody bandages and his side hurt from where Ginny had accidentally elbowed him.

He wasn’t angry with her because of the injuries; he’d been hurt a lot worse before. He was angry about something she had said. And he was angry with himself for yelling at her.

He sat down placing one of the boots he’d just wrestled from her next to him. He started to lace up his right boot when she grabbed his other one. She started running towards the orchard.

“Gin, give that back!” he yelled after her. When she didn’t stop, Harry took off after her. It was awkward running with only one boot on. Every time he lifted his right foot he felt the boot slip off slightly. When he caught up with her the boot finally came off.

He fell on her, landing hard. She yelped in pain and gasped as the air was knocked out of her body. He heard her laugh when she got her breath back and he rolled off of her angrily.

“Thanks,” he grumbled as Ginny handed him his boot.

“What’s the matter?” she asked him as she retrieved his other boot. He didn’t answer her and grabbed it roughly from her. “What’s the matter, luv?” she asked again, slightly hurt.

“Nothing,” he replied tying the second boot.

“Then why are you angry?” she countered smoothly. Harry stood up and faced her angrily.

“Let’s see,” he said pretending to think. “You just made me run in my socks across a snowy ground just to get the boot back that I had managed to wrestle from you,” he finished angrily. He didn’t mean to be cross, but he hurt too much to think clearly.

She had her hands on her hips and Harry knew that this was going to be a full-fledged argument. “One would think you’ve never played keep away before,” she told him angrily. He stared at her surprised. She had not just said that.

“I have, plenty of times,” Harry replied in a huff. “That was Dudley’s favorite game when we were growing up.” He heard her gasp, but he turned his back on her. Everyone was heading inside and Harry was going to change his socks.

Harry couldn’t believe she had said that. He hated the game keep away and he knew why. Years of humiliation flooded down on Harry. The Christmas break after his first year of school came to mind. Their teacher had given each student a little goody basket for Christmas. Dudley was a sweet little angel at school, but once they got home he

turned into a demon. He begged and screamed for Harry's candy and Aunt Petunia had given into the boy, as normal. Dudley spent the whole break slowly eating the candies in front of Harry, just to rub it in.

"Luv?" Harry heard Ginny's sorrow-filled voice come from the door. He turned his back to her, but he heard the door open all the way. "I'm sorry." Harry ignored her, though he knew he wouldn't last long. "I didn't mean to hurt you, luv."

"Why do you call me that now?" Harry asked, turning around quickly. He was surprised to see that she was standing right behind him. He looked up at her reflective face.

"I started calling you that when I was talking to you," she said quietly. "Back when you were close to dying. It seemed to help, I don't know," she said shrugging. "I'll stop if it bothers you."

Harry thought about it for a minute and shook his head no. "Gin, I'm sorry..."

"No, you shouldn't be," she said, putting a finger up to his lips. "I'm the one who put my foot in my mouth. The only thing you did was try to get your boots back." She smiled. Harry was stunned by the love and beauty in that one smile. He pulled her down next to him.

"Apology accepted," he whispered into her hair. "Did you tell your brothers?" She shook her head no and then rested it on his shoulder. She ran a finger up his left hand and realized that there was blood flowing through the bandage.

"Madame Pomfrey will kill us if we don't let this arm heal," she said with a laugh. "I'll be right back." She jumped off the bed and ran down the stairs. Harry smiled at her exuberance. As hard as he tried he couldn't free himself from the thoughts of his cousin and all the humiliation he had made Harry suffer.

One summer right around Harry's birthday, Dudley and his gang had decided that it was Harry-hunting season. He had run and hidden all over the neighborhood for about three weeks. The neighbors would call Aunt Petunia if they found him hiding in their plants or under

porches. He had preferred her shrieks to the beatings the gang gave him. One time they caught him in an alley and each member took a swing at Harry; Dudley took several. He went home with a broken nose, a few broken and bruised ribs, and a sprained ankle. Aunt Petunia was horrified and by the time Uncle Vernon had gotten home she had an elaborate story made up. She told him Harry had joined a gang and had taken part in a gang war. Neither would have ever believe nor accept that the gang he'd crossed paths with was led by her precious Diddy-cuns.

"Luv, are you alright?" Ginny's voice came from next to him. He jumped slightly but nodded. "Here, give me your arm." She efficiently unwrapped and rewrapped the bandage, putting more burn salve on. Harry couldn't help but think that the only reason Madame Pomfrey had let him out of the infirmary so soon was that it was Christmas. This arm was no where close to being healed.

"Thanks, Gin," he said once she was finished. She smiled at him. They sat in silence for a long while thinking their own thoughts. "Thanks for..."

"I was..." They laughed and Ginny let Harry continue.

"Thanks for teaching me to skate," he said smiling at the girl next to him. "It was a lot of fun."

"No problem, luv," she said with a smile. "Tomorrow I'll teach you how to stop." He laughed with her and wrapped his right arm around her. He was surprised at how odd it felt with her on that side. He had never realized how accustomed he had come to have her on his left. He was never really sure how they ended up kissing, but they were when Hermione's voice interrupted from the door.

"I was going to ask if Harry was going to hide up here all day," she said trying to keep her face straight, "but I see why you two disappeared." Ginny stuck her tongue out at her and Hermione left with a laugh. They straightened themselves out and followed Hermione downstairs.

Dinner was served later that evening and it was a wonderful banquet. Harry wondered how Mrs. Weasley could always out do herself. They spent the time after dinner talking in the living room. Several people started a chess tournament, but Harry opted to just watch. He was happy to find Ginny playing her dad for the championship. He cheered her on and felt her pain when she lost. Harry knew she absolutely hated losing.

At one point Melissa and Bill disappeared. When he got back she wasn't with him. He explained that he had taken her home and she wouldn't be back that night. The other Weasley boys teased him about it, but Harry left him alone. He was glad that Ginny wouldn't be leaving. Ron was slightly quieter about it too, because Hermione was thinking about spending the last week of break at home with her parents, or at least the days when they wouldn't be visiting Neville.

Neville still hadn't written them about the dates and Harry was getting curious. He had never been to Neville's and had only seen his grandmother in real life twice. He wondered what the house was like and what Neville's family was like.

He turned his attention back to the conversation Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were having. They were talking about Quidditch and the unbelievable news that England had asked all seven of the Holyhead Harpies to play on England's World Cup team. The players hadn't made any statements about it, but other teams were already complaining.

"They're just jealous," Ginny said contemptuously.

"Why is that?" Ron asked heatedly. "There has never been an English team made completely of one team before. It has always been a blend," he argued with her logically.

"But they're the best players," Ginny told him. "They have the best stats in each of their positions and they haven't been beaten once."

"She's got a point, Ron," Harry told him. Ron glanced at him and looked back at Ginny. "Their chasers are even better than the last Irish team's chasers. And they have a Seeker that rivals Vicky." Ginny

laughed and Hermione colored slightly. Vicky was a nickname Ron had given Victor Krum, an international playing Seeker, during their fourth year while Victor competed in the Triwizard Tournament. Hermione kind of went out with him that year and the following summer.

"Harry, don't bring up old news," Ginny said, hitting him lightly on the shoulder. "You don't need to cause trouble."

"I was only stating facts," Harry said in his defense. He couldn't keep the smile off his face though.

"Sure you were," Ron griped.

"I was," Harry said quickly. "Vicky is one of the best Seekers out there and their Seeker is just as good as he is. It's not my fault if Herm...."

"Harry Potter," Ginny said angrily. "Don't you dare finish that one."

"All I was going to say," Harry continued, "it's not my fault if she broke up with him last year and ruined his season." The three stared at him in surprise. "I read a letter you left lying around last spring," Harry confessed. "I watched his stats this summer and noticed that they nose-dived." Hermione punched him hard, causing her to receive a reprimand from her mother. She just shrugged the scolding off and glared at Harry.

"Why'd you read it?" she asked angrily.

"I was just as curious about what was going on between you two as Ron was," Harry answered, messaging his right shoulder. "You've got a good punch."

"Yeah, with best friends like you two," she said sarcastically, "I get loads of practice." Harry tried not to look at Ron and he knew Ron was trying not to look at him. He was too close to breaking out in laughter, which would be inappropriate, to risk even a short glance at Ron.

Ginny came to their rescue, though Harry doubted that she knew what was going on. "Hermione, I need to talk to you for a second." The two girls left the room and Harry took one quick glance at Ron. As he knew would happen, both boys snorted.

"I never realized she blames us," Ron said between laughs.

"I never realized how often she hits us," he returned.

"I have a very abusive girlfriend," Ron said wiping the tears of laughter from his face.

"You know," Harry said trying to calm down. "After Hermione and Ginny, Voldemort will be a breeze." This caused both boys to crack up laughing again.

"Mr. Potter," the angry voice of Mrs. Weasley sobered them instantly. "Do not joke about something so serious!" Harry looked at her surprised; he hadn't realized that everyone was watching them. He shrugged his shoulders; something any of the Weasleys could have told him was a bad idea. "Don't take that stance with me, young man!" Harry looked at Ron confused.

"Your shrug," Ron mouthed to him.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley," Harry apologized quickly. "But joking about it, I don't know." Harry stopped and thought about why he joked about it, absently running his fingers through his hair. "It makes it more real, but at the same time less daunting, I guess." He shrugged without thinking. "It's helped me to accept it."

"And why is that?" she asked still cross with him.

"Cause I talk about it then," Harry replied after a moment's thought. "Some things become too hard to handle without a joke or two at its expense. Like when Katie and I make the team practice in the rain, we let them complain and joke about us behind our backs." Harry noticed Ron's evident shame. "We know it makes the practice better for them and we laugh at them afterwards because it helps us."

Mrs. Weasley stared at the boy sadly. "I still wished you wouldn't compare the girls to You-Know-Who."

Harry felt a smile cross his face. He stared up at the ceiling to avoid any of the Weasley boys' eyes. When he got himself back under control he spoke to her. "Half the fun of being friends with Ginny and Hermione is that they are very forceful and slightly violent women." Ron choked out a laugh. "If I can survive dating Ginny and being best friends with Hermione, I can survive anything." All the men in the room laughed, along with Thia and Tonks. Harry realized that Ginny and Hermione had re-entered the room at some point and he couldn't tell if they were angry or pleased with what he had just said. "I'm sorry if I've offended, but I believe it's true." This caused a whole second round of laughs with the two mothers looking slightly affronted.

"Dear," Mr. Granger said to his wife before she lost her temper. "You know Hermione has your temper and your right hook, so give the boy a break." Mrs. Granger looked at him thoughtfully and then smiled appreciatively.

"And, Molly," Mr. Weasley said quietly, "Ginny's your daughter and a wonderful red head. It takes a lot of guts to live with one." Mrs. Weasley hit him on the shoulder and Harry had to control his face to keep the smile from betraying him. In the end Mrs. Weasley relented and the room fell back into its calm.

Hermione and Ginny went to a corner and talked quietly together. Ron and Harry eyed them warily; they could be planning anything. Eventually, the room emptied until only the twins, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were left.

"We're going to bed," Fred announced. "Don't stay up too late."

"And when you two go to bed," George told Ron and Harry, "keep the noise down." All four of them said good night to the departing twins.

Harry and Ron started a chess game that Ginny and Hermione watched. Harry begged Ginny for some help, but she wouldn't give in. Hermione was fighting back yawns, until she too went to bed. Harry and Ron looked at her retreating back in surprise.

“She woke up about an hour before you did, Ron,” Ginny explained. Ginny went to bed soon after, but Harry didn’t feel tired at all. In fact, he was dreading the nightmares he knew he was going to have that night.

After their second game, Ron stood up. “Night, Harry. Don’t stay up too late.” Harry nodded and went to sit by the fire. He wished that sleep wasn’t the torture it was. An hour went by without his knowledge.

“Luv?” Ginny said, taken by surprise as she entered the living room. “What are you still doing up?”

Harry was staring at the fire, but didn’t comprehend anything he saw or heard. He was too deep in thought to be brought back by that simple question.

“Luv?” she asked next to him. He still stared into the fire. “Harry, wake up!” she said loudly right next to his ear. He jumped and almost fell out of his chair. “Sorry.”

“That’s ok, Gin,” he said with a smile; he was glad that he was startled out of his train of thought. “What are you doing up?” he asked curiously.

“I’ve already asked you that, so you have to answer,” Ginny argued back at him. He smiled at her and laughed.

“Alright,” he answered, “I wasn’t tired so I stayed down here. I got lost in thought and would have stayed that way except you got me out of it. Now, why are you up?”

“Getting a drink of water,” she replied pulling him up out of his chair. He walked with her into the kitchen and watched as she filled a glass of water. He then walked up the stairs with her, hand in hand and kissed her good night at her door.

He slowly walked down the stairs back to the room he shared with the twins. It was one of the best Christmas’s he’d ever had. His only wish

to make it better was to hear, just once more, Sirius singing, “God rest ye, Merrye Hippogriffs” at the top of his lungs.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Good Old Rita

I took a walk around the world
To ease my troubled mind.
3 Doors Down: Kryptonite

“Hey,” Ron said, shaking Harry awake. “Quit the yelling.” Harry awoke, trying desperately to figure out where he was. He saw Ron and reality sunk in. He was sixteen, not five. He was at the Weasley’s, not the Dursley’s. He wasn’t the object of Dudley’s scorn anymore. “You okay there, Harry?” Ron asked worriedly.

“Yeah,” Harry answered hoarsely. He couldn’t figure out why his voice was so sore. He didn’t think last night’s nightmares had been all that bad. He had just watched a showing of Dudley’s and Uncle Vernon’s put-downs over the years; it hardly deserved his screams.

Once downstairs, Ginny and the other ladies gave him worried glances. He wanted them to stop, but knew that they never would. He sat down and started eating his breakfast. An owl flew in through the chimney and landed next to Ginny. After depositing the letter in Ginny’s hands, the owl flew to the stand where Errol and Hedwig were sitting. Ginny opened it curiously and read it quickly.

“Mum, can we go to Neville’s tomorrow and spend a few days there?” she asked once she was finished reading. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley traded a look and glanced quickly at Harry.

“We’ll see,” Mrs. Weasley answered uncommitted. “We’ll need to talk about it.”

“Neville needs a response by tonight,” Ginny informed her mother. “He’s sorry about the lateness of the invitation, but he sent them as soon as his grandmum gave him the okay.”

“We’ll see, baby girl,” Mr. Weasley said. Ginny knew she wouldn’t win and stopped talking. “Well, I’m off to work.”

“But dad,” Fred argued, “it’s Boxing Day!”

"I know," he replied wearily. "But I have loads of work, and I need to get it done. See you all tonight." He kissed his wife and daughter goodbye and floo-ed to work.

"I can't believe he has to work," Mrs. Weasley said to herself. "It's not like he's an Auror. He's just concerned with the misuse of Muggle artifacts. It isn't like he has to go in to work today."

Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny left the kitchen as knives started whizzing through the air. They went into the living room and sat near the fire. "I haven't seen her so worked up about dad's work habits before," Ginny said quietly.

"I have," Bill told her from the chess game he was playing with Charlie. "He used to work a lot before you were born."

"Yeah," Charlie answered just as pensively. "Basically every day and late into the nights. But everyone was at that time. If you worked for the Ministry, you were always working."

"What happened to change that?" Ron asked.

"Voldemort fell," Harry answered before the other two could. They nodded in agreement. "I wonder what life would be like if that hadn't happened?" The others quietened as they contemplated that. Harry wouldn't have grown up with the Dursley's, but he guessed that he would have spent the years in hiding. What would have happened to Wormtail?

"I don't think I want to know," Bill answered quietly. "It wouldn't have been good." Harry nodded in agreement. As much as he wanted his parents, he couldn't help but wonder if there would be a magical world to live in at all had Voldemort not fallen then. There was a long heavy silence as the group's thoughts turned towards the possibilities.

"Whoa," Fred said coming into the room. "It's way too somber in here."

"Let's go outside," George suggested brightly.

"I'll teach you how to stop, luv," Ginny told him, grabbing his arm and pulling him up.

"I don't know, Gin," Harry said carefully. "I don't know if my body can take the battering." She laughed at him and dragged him up the stairs. He grabbed his cloak and put on several socks and his boots. They spent the time before lunch skating. Hermione and Ron laughed each time Harry landed in a snow bank or fell on his bottom. He gave them glares, but it only caused them to laugh harder.

Remus and Tonks joined them on the ice about an hour before lunch. They skated together happily and Harry's resolve to see Operation Wedding, as the twins had named it, completed was strengthened. These two deserved the surprise and everything they had planned. Mrs. Weasley, on that fateful shopping trip, had convinced Tonks to go into a wedding gown store saying that the sooner she got ideas the better. Remus and Ron (who were along) were bored out of their minds, but when Tonks came out with one gown on they were speechless. She had returned to her natural looks (which she only did if she absolutely had to and hadn't for the other dresses) and looked stunning. Fred and George had gone back that Monday and bought the dress.

"What are you thinking of, luv?" Ginny asked as they passed the slow moving couple.

"How happy Remus and Tonks are," he answered her. "I'm glad we have the dress."

"She wants it on the beach," Ginny told him quietly. "I wonder who we know with a beach residence."

"I can't think of anyone," Harry answered after a while. "Do you think they'll be pleased?"

"I'm positive, luv," Ginny said as they passed them again. Harry looked at her and smiled.

"Lunch is ready!" the loud voice of Mrs. Granger called out over the grounds. The group changed from skates into boots without incident

and walked amiably up to the house. Lunch was a loud affair. Everyone was talking over everybody else just so that the person next to them could hear. Harry smiled happily; this was the way he had imagined a family should be.

After lunch they went back outside and built snowmen and snowwomen. Fred and George made one who looked a lot like Snape, and then proceeded to hit its head with snowballs until it bounced off. Harry didn't laugh as hard as he would have a week before. Charlie and Bill used some magic to create a snow-dragon and everyone loved it. Harry was happy rolling huge snowballs with Ginny and helping her put them on top of one another.

They went in for some hot chocolate and stayed inside. The weather was turning nasty again and Harry guessed that a storm was brewing. They sat calmly in the living room, talking about nothing in particular. Finally, Harry's mind worked its way back to the invitation from Neville.

"Is it because of me that you can't make a choice about us going to Neville's?" Harry asked, already knowing the answer.

"We need to get it cleared through Dumbledore," Mrs. Weasley said wearily. "I know you all really want to go and I'm sure it'll be alright. The Longbottoms have always been outspoken against the Dark Arts and particularly You-Know-Who."

"Remus left to go talk with him," Tonks added helpfully. "I'm sure they'll be able to work something out."

The afternoon passed and it was soon supper. That passed without the return of Remus or Mr. Weasley. Mr. Weasley was in some kind of meeting according to the grandfather clock in the corner. Everyone was guessing that Remus was still talking to Dumbledore about the trip.

As Harry was watching the newest clock hand pointing at home, he noticed Mr. Weasley's hand move from meeting to travelling. He was expecting it to move right on to home, but it went to the visiting spot.

"I wonder where he's gone to," Mrs. Weasley said, for she too was watching the clock. An hour passed and Harry watched Mr. Weasley's hand move to travelling again and then it stopped at home. Harry saw a brief look of grief pass over Mrs. Weasley's face. He looked back at the clock and saw why; there were nine hands at home and one with Percy's name on it pointing towards prison.

Mr. Weasley entered the room and sat down wearily. "You three," he said pointing to Ron, Ginny, and Harry, "are allowed to go to the Longbottoms for three days."

"What about Hermione?" Ron asked confused.

"It's up to her parents," he told the red head. Hermione turned to her mum and dad and they nodded their consent.

"I'll come home after that," she promised them. They smiled at her.

"We're leaving tomorrow," Mrs. Granger told everyone. "We really need to get back to the practice. We'll have so many make-up appointments, it isn't even funny."

"I'm sorry you missed work," Harry apologized.

"Don't be," Mr. Granger said with a smile. "It was a joy meeting Hermione's friends and their family. And you all are welcome to our house whenever you'd like." Hermione hugged her dad and smiled at him.

"Welcome," a stately witch said, ushering them inside the house. "It's a pleasure to see you again." She was an old witch with grey hair and a bony face, wearing a long green dress and what was most definitely a vulture on top of her hat. "Remus, it has been too long since you've been here."

"It has," Remus replied sadly. "It's nice to see you, Mrs. Longbottom." Harry had found out this morning that Remus and Tonks were coming along as his personal guards. He wasn't all that pleased with it, but he knew he'd never win the battle to go alone with his friends.

“Neville is up the stairs in Frank’s old room,” she told Remus. “Will you take these four up there? I can’t handle the stairs too often any more.” Remus nodded and they followed him up the stairs.

“You knew the Longbottoms?” Ron asked quietly. Remus glanced down at Mrs. Longbottom and nodded.

“Frank was a year ahead and worked with Thia for awhile when they were Aurors together.” He stopped at the top of the stairs and looked at them tiredly. “Alice was in our year and she was a good friend of Lily’s. You wouldn’t believe how excited those two girls were when they found out that they were pregnant at the same time. I think they nearly drove James and Frank insane.” He smiled and headed down the hallway. “Here we are. This is the room.”

Remus knocked on the door and Lavender opened it. “Hey, Professor Lupin. Congratulations on your engagement.”

Tonks started laughing at the dumbfounded look on his face. “How’d you guys find out about that?”

“Harry told us, back in November,” Dean called from the window seat. “What are you doing here and who’s the girl with purple polka-dotted hair?”

Harry got everyone inside and laughed at Remus’ face. “This is Tonks, his fiancée.” Tonks started to laugh harder when Remus blushed ever so slightly. Harry tried to keep a straight face, but was failing. “They’re here because a certain Dark Lord has taken a liking to Potter-shish-kebab so I get guards. It’s kind of annoying, but there are worse bodyguards.”

“Tonks,” Parvati said, as if tasting the name. “That’s an odd first name.”

“It’s my last name and if any one of you tell them my first name, I’ll flay you,” Tonks threatened, brandishing her wand.

“Now, Nymph, we all love your first name,” Remus teased her.

“Her name’s Nymphadora, but—” Harry started, but he had to put a shield up to block whatever she had sent his way. “The only problem with the guards I’ve been given is that they try to kill me too.” Tonks launched herself at him playfully and got his arms behind his back.

“And maybe you should remember that and try not to provoke us,” she told him threateningly.

“Tonks, let him go,” Remus told her, rolling his eyes. She let go of him warily, but Harry held his hand out for a truce. “You can beat him up once the school term starts again.” When Tonks nodded the others gave the three an odd look.

“Tonks and Remus help Thia with my lessons on the weekends,” Harry explained. “Seeing that all three of them are loads better than I am at dueling, they win every time.” He turned to Tonks and told her boldly, “Wait ‘til I learn to fight properly, then I’ll pin you.” Tonks laughed harder at him.

“How did you dye your hair like that?” Lavender asked curiously.

“Watch,” she said screwing her face up in concentration. It turned neon pink with black spikes.

“Cool,” Dean said in awe. “How’d you do that?”

“You want pink hair, Thomas?” Ginny said teasing him. “I know a handy spell that’ll turn it pink for you.”

“No!” he said holding his hands up in submission. “I want to spike it with neon green for Quidditch games.”

“I’m a Metamorphmagus,” Tonks explained. “It’s an inherited trait that allows me to change my appearance at will.”

“You’re too cool for Remus,” Ron teased the couple. “I don’t know why you won’t go out with Bill or Charlie.”

“Could it be because Bill actually really likes Melissa or Charlie won’t shut up about his little Romanian cupcake?” Tonks asked, feigning

thought. "Or maybe it's because I actually love Remus, so I don't really have a choice in the matter."

"Glad you want to marry me," Remus complained. Tonks laughed before hugging and kissing him. Harry and Ron groaned loudly and Ginny and Hermione ahhh'd annoyingly. The others just watched in either horror or confusion.

"Gross, isn't it," Ron said once they were done. "They've been doing that all break."

"Well, we do have to compete with you four love birds," Tonks said viciously. "I mean the only reason this one-up-man-ship even started was because Harry and Ginny freaked out her brothers at the start of the holidays." Harry felt his cheeks burn and watched as Ginny's also lit up.

"I should go talk with Mrs. Longbottom," Remus said before Tonks and Harry started another fight. "Come with me, Tonks." He led her out by the hand, nearly dragging her.

"They ain't so bad," Seamus said approvingly.

"Yeah, but walking in on them making-out is not something I ever want to do again," Ron said in disgust. "It's worse than walking in on Harry and Ginny."

"Thanks mate," Harry said punching him. "It's not like you've caught us all that much."

"And when exactly have you been manhandling my sister?" Ron asked teasing him. Harry felt his cheeks burn redder and just about hexed the smile off of Ron's face.

"And it would be none of your business, Ron," Ginny told him warningly. "I believe it's worse catching you, but you don't hear me complaining."

"Okay," Neville said, speaking for the first time. "Don't make me send you home."

Harry looked around the room and noticed that every Gryffindor from their year, plus Luna and Ginny, were present. They spent the day talking to one another, filling each other in on what they had done the first week of break. Lunch was an informal affair, sandwiches and some fruit eaten in Neville's room.

Harry liked Neville's room. There were pictures of his mum and dad up everywhere; Neville said that they were there since his dad used the room. There was a lot of Gryffindor memorabilia and some Chudley Cannon stuff. Ron had never known that another Cannon fan shared his dorm, but he did now. There was a bump-out window with a window seat covered in Gryffindor-red pillows for reading. There was a small fireplace with two extremely comfortable chairs in front of it.

That evening they all went downstairs for supper. It was rather formal, but they survived it. Mrs. Longbottom and Remus talked about days long gone and Harry was hit by how lonely Remus truly was. Tonks listened to the stories; obviously she had only heard a few of them. Neville and his friends talked amongst themselves, but Harry caught Neville listening as much as he was.

"Remember Christmas of Frank's seventh year?" Mrs. Longbottom said with a smile. "When he proposed and nearly scared Alice out of her mind."

Remus laughed, "James gave Lily that promise ring even though they had never dated once. I felt so bad for those two girls that year. Thia and Sam spent the rest of Christmas calming them down."

"When did Alice actually say yes?" Mrs. Longbottom asked curiously. "They never told me." Remus laughed long and hard causing the conversation at the other end of the table to stop.

"I don't think she ever did," Remus answered once he had calmed down. "When she ran up the stairs that morning she still had the ring in her hand. Some time shortly after Valentine's Day it showed up on her finger. Frank told us that he hadn't asked her again. He was just

grateful that Alice hadn't thrown the ring down the drain or out a window. It gave James some hope."

"Is that ring, the one that Ginevra's wearing, the same one?" Mrs. Longbottom asked shrewdly.

"Why, yes it is," Remus answered surprised. "I can't believe you recognized it after all those years. James gave them to me to give to Harry, just in case," he added sadly. She nodded in understanding and a deep silence filled the room.

Supper was a quiet affair after that, the adults stuck in sad remembrances and the teens in embarrassed silence. Once the teens were done with dessert they went to the den to play games. Harry watched Ginny beat Luna at a game of chess.

"So," Lavender started quietly. "Where'd you get that ring?" Harry felt his cheeks redden and watched as Ginny twirled the ring on her right hand.

"Harry gave it to me," she answered. "It was his mum's," she added needlessly.

"That was nice of you, Harry," Parvati said sweetly, batting her eyes at him sarcastically. Harry wanted to crawl out of the room. "Why'd you give it to her?"

"'Cause I wanted to," Harry responded a little too harshly. "Sorry," he mumbled, "I've had to deal with her brothers for two days now, so I'm a little sore about it."

The room fell silent and everyone returned to their respective games. After midnight they all went upstairs. "Luna'll show you to your rooms," Neville told the girls and they followed her down the hall to a room on the right. The guys entered Neville's room, which was now filled with beds for everyone.

The next day everyone had a grand time, playing in the fresh snow and skating on the large pond. Harry and Ginny even found time to sneak away to "talk". Harry was just happy to be alone with her for a

short time. This break it seemed that someone was always around when they were together. Lunch was spent warming their fingers and toes up only to have them freeze again outside afterwards; they spent the afternoon sledding down the hill that bordered the pond. Supper was the same formal event, though there were a few more relatives today than yesterday. Harry watched Remus talk to a few as if they were old friends and Tonks listening to them raptly. He wondered what they were talking about.

Afterwards they went to the den once again. They started an Exploding Snap tournament and Harry found himself out after the first round. He cheered Ginny and Ron on (Ginny was playing Hermione, so he picked his girlfriend over his other best friend) and watched the other games.

As he was looking around the room during a slow moment his eye caught the magazines and newspapers lying next to the couch. He realized that he hadn't read a paper for weeks, not since Rita's article at the start of the month. He went over and sat next to the pile picking up the top copy of the Daily Prophet.

Friend or Foe:

Potter's "fights" the Dark Lord

By Rita Skeeter

Just yesterday the village of Hogsmeade was wracked by the visit of the Dark Lord. He and his faithful Death Eaters nearly destroyed all of Main Street in the fight that ensued against the Aurors. But what is most both surprising and disturbing about this is the major role Mr. Harry Potter, currently a sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, played in the events.

Witnesses tell this faithful reporter that Mr. Potter exited the Three Broomsticks moments before the first of the Dementors arrived. The witnesses go on to report that he was nearly kissed before his Patronus, in the shape of a stag, came to his rescue. The Patronus saved many lives;

but, unfortunately, Mr. Potter was not able to save the lives of four innocents.

The next event has this impartial reporter the most puzzled. The Dark Lord arrived with several of his most faithful and trusted Death Eaters, including Hogwarts' own Potions Master, Professor Severus Snape, for the Dark Lord requested him to remove his mask. Mr. Potter and the Dark Lord had a small conversation and then Mr. Potter drew his wand to challenge the most feared Dark Lord that has lived in centuries.

What type of sixteen-year-old would do this? For that matter, what forty-year-old man would? I ask you this, not to make trouble, but to make you wonder about the situation, to make you think about it in another light.

What if this whole thing was a ploy? True, Mr. Potter did dodge several of the most Unforgivable of curses and was even hit with the Cruciatus at one point. Yet, Potter's life was not saved by one of the Aurors, who appeared to the scene moments later, but by the turncoat Severus Snape. How can we be sure about his loyalties? Can we let such a man teach our children? Could Potter and Snape be in this together? Or could these two possibly be following orders from the same master?

Take the events of this Friday with a grain of salt. Go ahead, if you want, and believe the propaganda put out about the fight without once considering the details. But don't say I didn't warn you.

Harry was furious; he crumpled the paper in a tight ball and threw it into the fire. He almost dies and she writes crap like this!

"That's what my grandmother thought," Neville said looking at Harry in understanding. "We started getting the Prophet when they printed the good stuff, but she cancelled the subscription after that article."

Rita has no tact. Read the article in the Quibbler though; it's a good one."

Harry picked up the most recent addition of the Quibbler, the magazine Luna's father publishes, and stared at the photo of the aftermath of the battle.

Harry Potter Saves the Day!

By Vachel Mente

I must begin by emphasizing the sad state the publication that I previously wrote for has come. As you all remember, last year at this time the London Daily Prophet was forced to print slander against Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter by none other than the late Minister himself. Well, after several months of freedom the newspaper is once again under pay. This time the source of the money is not as obvious; in fact, I'm not sure who is actually forcing the editors to print the garbage that they are, but it is pathetic.

Only two long days ago, Hogsmeade suffered two attacks, a Dementor and Death Eater attack. Many souls and lives were saved by the quick thinking and wand work of Harry Potter, only a sixth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The Dark Lord appeared and Harry did one of the bravest things I've ever heard of: he challenged the same Dark Lord we all cringe in fear of to a duel. My replacement at the Prophet has gossiped that it was only a ploy to strengthen our trust in Harry Potter, but I know the truth.

My sources gave me a copy of the exact letter the Dark Lord sent Harry and the letter Harry sent back. I'm afraid to tell you that the Dark Lord admitted to seeking Harry's death since BEFORE

the boy was born. I'm also afraid to tell you that all those he loves are in danger because of the response he made.

In a public letter (I'm told most of the school heard it read aloud at least once) Harry made a complete mockery of the Dark Lord's offer. He informs the Dark Lord of all the "plans" he has once he joins, but first let me quote to you my favorite.

"I like to say insolent remarks at inopportune times. I've already planned some for our meetings with our Death Eaters. After you tell them our plan, I'll say out loud, 'As easy as taking candy from a baby,' but then under my breath but loud enough for all to hear I'll say, 'but some of us have problems with that.'"

They all run along that line of thought; things he would do to annoy the crap out of the Death Eaters. He wrote a total of six plans. The list would include playing knock-and-run, reading *The Ugly Duckling* every night, eating the Dark Lord's pet snake, asking whether the Dark Lord ever had a girlfriend, and giving the Dark Lord the new nickname, "The Seriously Dark Wizard Who Let The Boy Who Lived Live."

But it is the Post Script that inspires me the most. And against all my better judgment, I am going to print it for you all to read. "Go! To! Hell! Love, H. Potter T.B.W.L. (The Boy Who Lived)"

It is this that strengthens my deep-rooted faith in the boy. He is not the Boy Who Lived To Join Voldemort, but the Boy Who Lived To Fight Voldemort. Even though he moved himself to the top of the Dark Lord's death list, (arguably he has held that place for 16 years now) he is willing to stand up for what he believes in.

At the moment of this writing, Harry Potter and Severus Snape lie in the infirmary of Hogwarts, both near death.

It has been revealed to me that Severus once again took up the mantle of spy and has saved many lives since that fateful summer just two years ago. One way or another, Severus broke the Cruciatus Curse that was very slowly destroying Harry's mind and body. For that he has my confidence and well wishes.

You may believe the lies printed in other publications or you can believe the truth. You get to choose. But just remember the choice Harry Potter made when given the easy option and the hard option.

For Harry's full letter, see page 27

For details of the Battle of Hogsmeade see page 39

Harry stared at the magazine in awe. "They printed his name," he said breathlessly. He had never once seen the name printed before. In fact, the only time he had seen it written out was when he or one of his friends had taken the time to write a note.

"Yeah," Luna said dreamily, "dad agreed with Vachel that it was appropriate. After everything else they might as well."

"Did you guys know about this?" Harry asked his three friends. They wouldn't look him in the eye. "Why didn't you tell me?" he accused them.

"Mum didn't want us to upset you, luv," Ginny said calmly.

"Why would this upset me?" Harry asked angrily. "I was the one who accidentally dropped the copy of my letter and Voldemort's for Dumbledore to pick up and give to him. I actually was all right with this article. It's Rita's that's stupid."

"Oh," Ginny said surprised. "Well, how were we supposed to know that?"

"You still could have told me about it all," Harry argued. He pointed at the burning embers that were all that was left of Rita's article. "I mean,

this cow accused me of being a Death Eater. Don't you think I deserved to know that?"

"She already did that though, Harry," Hermione argued with him logically.

"But not in so few words," Harry told them. "I mean, she might as well have titled the article, 'Harry Potter Joins Voldemort: Fight a Ploy To Win Our Trust!'" Hermione and Ron looked away guiltily, but Ginny stood up and faced the furious boy.

"It's not like we had a choice," Ginny told him angrily. "We were told not to and if we wanted to see you that Tuesday we had to follow orders."

"You could have told me," Harry repeated lamely. "I'm sick of not knowing things about me; of having people keep secrets about me. No wonder Rita finds it so easy to print this crap; I don't even know everything about me, but everyone else does."

"But no one believes that, Harry," Dean told the still angry boy. "We all know it's only lies."

"No," Harry stated simply. "There are people out there that believe those lies and they think I'd turn my back on them. They believe I'd take the easy way out!" Harry was yelling once more and Remus came running into the room, followed by Tonks.

"What's going on?" he asked calmly, getting everyone's attention instantly. Harry shoved the article into his hands. "I thought you'd like that one," Remus said with a smile. "After all..."

"It's not that one that I'm angry about," Harry said dangerously. He was glad Rita wasn't in the room, because he wanted to hurt her as much as he could. "It's Rita's article."

A cloud passed over Remus' face and he nodded. "I see, well, in that case, I'm sorry we kept it from you," he said in understanding. "But those who make the decisions about your health chose not to tell you and blackmailed the rest of us into it. I'm sorry."

"And who's that?" Harry asked hotly.

"Mrs. Weasley, Madame Pomfrey, and Professor Dumbledore," Remus replied evenly, though Harry heard the note of bitterness added to Dumbledore's name. Harry knew he wouldn't get his temper under control by talking to these people.

"I'm going for a walk," he stated, heading for the door. "Though, I'm sure that I need a baby-sitter, so which one is coming?" Tonks and Remus traded a look worried look.

"I am," Ginny said before they could reply, "and Tonks." Remus nodded and the two ladies hurried after the retreating form of Harry; he hadn't waited for them to choose.

Ginny caught up to him and wrapped her arm around his waist. Tonks walked on Ginny's other side and they walked in silence. Harry set a fast pace, but he had a lot of pent up frustration to burn off.

"You'd think," Harry said after a long time, "that with everything that happened in my life it would gain me a bit of respect." The two girls kept quiet and decided to let Harry talk it out. "I mean, I lost my parents and temporarily delayed the rise of a Dark Lord before I could walk or talk. I saved the Philosopher's Stone, you, Gin, and Peter's life all before I turned fourteen. I survived the Triwizard Tournament and the graveyard the next year. I put up with their crap all of fifth year only to have it proved true, at the cost of Sirius' life. But I can't even properly mourn his death, because I'm supposed to hate his guts for betraying my parents." He stopped suddenly and ran his hand through his hair. Ginny and Tonks had to turn around to stand next to him; they had both walked several feet before they realized what had happened.

"Why does she have to write stuff like that?" Harry asked suddenly.

"If you don't tell Molly, I'll tell you why," Tonks bargained with him.

"I won't," he promised.

"The Prophet is in You-Know-Who's pay," she told them. "Not officially, but as far as we can tell, rich, still secret Death Eaters are paying them to print that stuff so that the public loses faith in you. Vachel quit the paper as soon as he found out earlier this month." Harry stared at her, dumbfounded; he had never thought that Voldemort spread his influence so far.

"Can't you do something about that?" Ginny asked after a long moment of stunned silence.

"We don't have any proof that they are Death Eaters," she responded. "We have the proof that they gave money, but no proof that they are actually Death Eaters. Several reporters have quit and a few have joined the Order and write for the Quibbler now. Luna's father joined the Order earlier this month."

Harry shook his head in anger. Voldemort was slowly ruining every part of his life without even trying. He couldn't spend a day with Ginny in Hogsmeade, he had to have bodyguards, he needed extra lessons, and he had to either become a victim or a murderer. He only wanted to live with his friends, laugh at their jokes, and just be a regular kid. He just wanted his family back, to live with them, to gain support from them, and to just be a kid. Was that too much to ask?

Ginny and Tonks moved away from the boy slowly, both in awe of what they saw. Radiating from Harry like rays of light was power, pure and commanding. Harry didn't seem to notice it, but it was surrounding him in a halo of energy.

Harry thought back to his third year when he had first heard his parents die. He thought about the nightmares about their deaths he'd experienced since first year, and the vague ones before that. He thought of the stories Remus, Sirius, and Thia had told him about his parents. He thought of every person who had told him that he looked just like his dad; well, except for the eyes, which were his mum's. He even thought of every time Malfoy, Voldemort, and Snape had insulted them.

He wanted that family, the one that was taken from him. Not that the Weasleys weren't good enough; they just weren't his parents. He

wanted to meet them, to talk to them, to have the chance to judge them, and learn to love them.

He thought of his dream, or whatever that was while he had been close to death. He had had a chance to talk with them, for the first time. He had seen Sirius once again. He almost couldn't believe he had come back. So much of him wanted those three people, but the other, slightly smaller, part wanted to live with his adopted family and protect them from what would happen if he didn't destroy Voldemort.

His thoughts turned to his new family. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were wonderful adopted parents and loved him as if he were theirs. Bill was a great brother and had a good mind to figure out puzzles. Charlie was the most like Ron and was the most athletic. The twins were great, they had helped him laugh when he needed to, but they also knew when to step back and let him be. And what could he say about Ron? Ron was the brother he never had and a loyal friend.

His thoughts then turned to Ginny. She was special; whether or not he actually loved her, he didn't know. He did know that she was special and he would hate to lose her. She wasn't afraid to stand up to him and tell him when he was wrong. She knew how to praise him without embarrassing him. She knew how to listen without commenting on everything he said. He turned and looked at the girl standing a few feet away. Her face held apprehension, awe, and a little fear.

"What's the matter, Gin?" he asked concerned. She glanced at Tonks and sighed in relief as the power resided.

"Nothing, luv," she responded. "Are you ready to go inside?" He looked at her and then at the house.

"Well," he started, looking at Tonks. "Can the both of just walk for a bit? Without a guard?" Tonks looked at him and nodded.

"Don't do anything that'll get me in trouble with her brothers," Tonks told them both with a wink. "I might be able to handle one or two, but not all of them."

Harry smiled and promised that they wouldn't. Tonks returned to the house and Harry walked over to Ginny. "Thanks for coming along," he told her truthfully. She smiled at him and took his hand. Harry led her to the pond and they walked along its edge until both were frozen. Harry went to bed soon after and dreamed once again of his parents' deaths.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: A Little Carried Away

So, thank you for showing me
That best friends cannot be trusted.
And thank you for lying to me.
Your friendship and good times we had
You can have them back.
Simple Plan: Thank You

The next day passed in a blur of fun, and Harry found himself back at the Burrow that night. He couldn't believe that three days had passed, but they had. He was even more surprised to find out how fast that last week of break could go. It was already the last Thursday before they had to go back to Hogwarts and he was going to miss the Burrow.

They went skating that afternoon and Harry even managed to win the last race. He thought they let him win, but in reality it was because the other brothers were exhausted from all the racing they had done. One way or the other, Harry won it and the twins decided to let the world know. They put, "Harry actually won!" in huge letters across the sky.

"Fred and George Weasley!" Mrs. Weasley screamed from the kitchen. "Take that down this instant! We don't need the muggles seeing it!" Bill raised his wand and the words come down. "Get in here now!" she yelled, but only to be heard this time.

They walked up to the kitchen talking loudly to one another. Fred and George were the first into the house, but stopped suddenly. Ron, who was talking to Charlie, didn't notice their sudden halt and ran right into Fred's back. Bill pushed from behind and forced his way into the house, herding the rest in as he went.

Once Harry was inside, he understood why the twins had stopped so suddenly. At the kitchen table sat Mrs. Weasley, Tonks, and Remus facing Thia and three strangers. These strangers were something else entirely. The man sitting next to Thia was dressed in well-made robes that were clearly out of style. The woman next to Thia had a smile on her face but took in everything she saw. And the man sitting

next to that woman was... 'wild' was the first word that came to Harry's mind.

"Hey, Harry," Thia said brightly. "I'd like to introduce you to your new teachers. This is Druce Keene, your spell master," she said pointing to the man to her right. "This is Althea Cayrs, your healing trainer," she said pointing to the woman to her left who nodded her head in acknowledgement. "And that," she said pointing to the last man, "is Lon Bryant, your physical trainer."

Harry smiled at them and held his hand out to shake hands with each of them. "Thanks for agreeing to train me," he said as he shook their hands. "I want to learn everything."

"We'll see," the woman said in a gentle voice. "Thia recommended you as a student, but her word goes only so far. Then you'll have to prove yourself able to learn what we have to teach you," she added. Harry nodded in understanding and sat next to Remus.

"Druce will be training you during your old Charms slot and Althea will train you during your old Herbology slots," Thia explained.

"What about his physical training?" Ron asked from the other end of the table.

"It will be before breakfast, every day for an hour," Thia answered. "That's what you said would work, right?" she asked turning to Harry.

"Yeah," he answered with a nod. "I have D.A., home work, Quidditch, and training with you after classes, so I can't have it any time but earlier." Thia nodded and turned to her friends.

"So, if you couldn't tell," she said with a smile, "that's Harry. Next to him is Ginny, his girlfriend, and Ron, his best mate. There's also Hermione, but she's at her home right now." She went on to introduce each of the Weasley brothers. She turned back to Harry and smiled at him. "I should tell you that Professor Flitwick was hurt by your decision to quit his class."

"I'm going to miss it," Harry said. "He's always happy and charms is a good class for a laugh." He caught Ron's eye and they both smiled. Charms would always be their favorite.

"He was heartened when I told him that you'll be sitting for the N.E.W.T., though," she said with a smile. "And he was thrilled when I told him Druce would be teaching you."

"Why?" Fred asked curiously.

"Professor Flitwick and I were classmates at Hogwarts and roommates in the Ravenclaw dorm," Druce said in explanation. "We were good friends and we both enjoy charms. It was my first mastery and will always be my favorite."

"What does it mean to be a spell master?" Ginny asked after a short pause.

"It means that I have a mastery in at least three branches of Charms, three branches of Transfiguration, and two other branches of magic," he answered in a slow measured voice. "Over the years I have gathered many masteries, so I fulfill the requirements."

"Is Professor Dumbledore a spell master?" Bill asked.

"He could be if he wanted to," Thia answered after a thought. "He has the required three Transfiguration masters, but I don't think he ever tried for any others. He's always been one to shun that kind of honor and only worries about the worries of the world."

"Is Harry going to learn how to fight?" Ron asked with a wicked grin on his face.

"Harry is going to learn," Lon answered in a quick, harsh tone, "whatever I decide to teach him."

"Now, Lon," Thia scolded him, "let's try and play nice. Harry will learn hand to hand and a few armed combat skills. Mainly though, Lon's main goal is build up Harry's strength and stamina." She looked down at her watch. "Well, we need to be going. We have to meet with

Professor Dumbledore in ten minutes and I just wanted to introduce these three to you, Harry. See you three once school starts,” she said waving goodbye to Harry, Ginny, and Ron. The four got up and left the house through the kitchen door. Harry heard four distinct pops and they were gone.

“So where did Thia meet these people?” Mrs. Weasley asked Remus worriedly.

“I’m not sure,” he answered sounding slightly bitter. “She met them while she was under cover.” The others nodded and then left the kitchen to sit in the more comfortable living room. Ron and Harry started a game of chess, but lost interest in the game quickly. They were, instead, talking about Harry’s new teachers.

Ron seemed to like them; though he thought Lon, his physical trainer, was something else. Ginny called him slightly wild and rough around the edges. Harry had to agree, but something else about that man made him believe he was a good warrior.

Harry tried to sneak away to talk just with Ginny, but her brothers didn’t believe him. Ginny was at a boiling point; she was furious that her brothers would interfere so. However, Mrs. Weasley called them in for dinner and Ginny had to let it go.

When Harry was finished with his meal he sat listening to all the conversations. He couldn’t believe that he’d be leaving for Hogwarts on Sunday, just three days away.

“Come on, Remus,” Fred said pleading with the man. “You’re a big help and we would love to hire you as product designer.”

“Yeah,” George went on, “there’s no way we’d have figured out the Crying Whoopee without you. You deserve some pay for that.”

“And the part you played in making the Marauder’s Map,” Fred whispered after a glance at his mum.

“Yeah,” George agreed. “Without that we would have been expelled long before our seventh year.”

"No, I'm not taking the job..." Remus started irritated.

"So, Melissa," Mrs. Weasley asked the smiling girl next to her, "Do you like Bill's hair long?"

"Mum, I'm not letting you cut it," Bill exclaimed in exasperation.

"I love it, Mrs. Weasley," she said as she stroked her hand through his ponytail. "But if you don't really like it, maybe Bill should cut it."

"Why you little traitor..." Bill started ranting.

There was a loud laugh next to him and Harry turned his attention to Ron, Ginny, and Charlie. Charlie was telling his youngest siblings about the numerous close calls he and his colleagues had had over the year.

He heard his name spoken and he turned to listen to the conversation Tonks was having with Mr. Weasley.

"I like them," Tonks answered Mr. Weasley's question. "I've heard of Druce before, but I didn't know he taught students. He's more of a learner than an educator. But Harry'll learn loads from him."

"What do you think about the other two?" he asked quietly.

"I've never met or heard about them before," Tonks added. "I'm not sure what I think about them, but if Thia trusts them, I will. She seems to know them rather well and she trusts them."

"Do you know if they told them about the Prophecy?" he asked after a pause. Harry listened for the answer to this question eagerly; he had wonder that also.

"As far as I know, no, they didn't," Tonks answered. "But I could be wrong. It sounded like they thought highly of Thia's recommendation and I heard something about a few favors being paid for the lessons."

Harry stopped listening to everyone and shut his eyes; the wonderful feast was working its power on him and putting him to sleep. After what felt like seconds he was shaken.

"Harry, luv, wake up," Ginny's voice cooed in his ear. Harry opened his eyes and saw the dinning room empty. "Everyone went to the living room. Did you want to talk to me about something?"

Harry smiled at her and stood up. "No," he said quietly and quickly. He pulled her into an embrace and kissed her. "I just wanted to give you that," he said, grimacing as his voice broke. She giggled at him and hit him over the head.

"So you let me yell at my brothers 'cause they accused you of the truth," Ginny scolded him with a smile.

"Well," Harry said pulling her close for another kiss. He continued with his thought when they broke apart. "You looked like you were having fun yelling, so I wasn't going to stop you." She went onto her tiptoes and kissed him passionately. When they were done she hit him over the head again and pulled out of his arms. She looked over his shoulder and blushed.

"Hello, mum," she said nervously.

"Come on into the living room," Mrs. Weasley said sweetly. "We miss both of your company." She ushered them out of the kitchen and into the living room.

"They weren't making out, were they mum?" Bill asked with a frown on his face. Bill confused Harry. Sometimes he would be all right with Harry and Ginny dating and other times he would freak out.

"No," Mrs. Weasley said, surprising both Harry and Ginny. "They were talking." Harry smiled at her and sat next to Ron who was playing against his dad. Ginny went to talk with her mother quietly in a corner.

"If you can survive her temper," Mr. Weasley told Harry, "Ginny is worth all the world. And if you make Ginny happy and are good for

her, Molly will do almost anything for you.” Harry nodded wondering how he knew Mrs. Weasley was lying. “After as many years as we’ve been married, you learn to be able to tell when the other is lying.” Harry nodded in understanding.

“Wait,” Ron said surprised, setting his queen down by accident. “Does that mean that Harry and Ginny were snogging?”

“Yes,” Mr. Weasley said with a smile. Harry couldn’t tell if it was because he was thrilled with the relationship they had or the fact that he could capture Ron’s misplaced queen.

Harry found himself in a huge, dark room. The only source of light was a tiny window set in the wall about twenty feet above the ground. The edges of the room were cloaked with shadows and the tiny square beam of light illuminated Harry.

He stood there, trying to figure out where he was. This place seemed familiar, but he couldn’t place where he had seen it before. He had certainly never been in a room quite like this before. Just then a door opened in the corner letting in a small amount of light and mist floated in. A figure stood outlined by this light and then whomever it was walked into the room. As it drew nearer to Harry, he felt his breath catch in horror.

It was Bill, covered in his own blood. He was walking unsteadily and Harry realized that he was missing a foot. Bill walked on the stump, cringing in pain with each step. Bill started circling Harry, his eyes staring at Harry with accusation. Harry was too preoccupied to notice another figure step into the room, but he did notice the man when he walked into his line of sight.

It was Charlie, but he had no real skin. It had been burnt away and only remained only as a black, charred crust. He joined his elder brother in circling Harry, with the same glare. The next person was Shackbolt. He was bleeding from a hole right through his abdomen; Harry could see the blackness behind him through that hole. Shackbolt joined in the circling, shooting him glances filled with condemnation.

Harry watched as two forms stood in the doorway. They limped towards Harry and he almost puked in revulsion. Fred had the right side of his body cut off and George had the left side of his body cut off also. They held onto each other and worked together to walk forwards. They stopped in front of Harry and stared at him; he could feel the unspoken condemnation. They then joined the growing circle and slowly walked around Harry.

Harry felt his throat close as he saw Remus enter carrying the mangled body of Tonks. Remus looked fine, but Tonks had lost her arms and legs and had huge gaps in her remaining skin. Remus shed unnoticed tears and both he and Tonks glared at the boy in disappointment and disgust. They joined the silent walkers that surrounded Harry.

Mrs. Weasley was the next in, but she walked bent over and in pain. Harry saw that her arms and legs were deformed with spells, her right arm completely turned around backwards. Harry tried to step forward, but some force kept him still. He tried to speak out, but that same force kept him silent.

Ron entered next and Harry felt his knees start to buckle. Between him and Mr. Weasley was the limp form of Professor Dumbledore. Both walking men carried the distinct look of being under the Cruciatus for long periods of time. They stood in front of Harry and Dumbledore raised his head. Harry felt his heart break as he registered the look in those eyes. They were grief-stricken and cloudy. There wasn't even a slight trace of the normal twinkle that filled them.

As the three men started walking around Harry, Harry turned his attention to the door. Three figures stood silhouetted by the dim light shining in. Two were supporting the third in a similar way as Ron and Mr. Weasley were supporting Dumbledore. Harry watched praying that they weren't who he thought they were.

Ginny hung in the supporting grasps of Thia and Hermione. All three women looked horrible and broken. Harry had never seen these three women look defeated before, but here they stood before him devastated.

"He killed us, Harry," the hoarse voice of Bill informed him as he passed Harry. "He killed each of us slowly, because we were close to you. And only because we were close to you."

"He burnt me to a crisp," Charlie told him. "And the whole time He was laughing about how ironic it was that I should burn to death and not be killed by a dragon," he added with a harsh and bitter laugh. "I didn't find it so amusing."

"He sent a spell through me," Shacklebolt told him, "that destroyed my insides. It didn't kill me though. Not right away at least. I would have been luckier if it had."

"Do you like His thoughts on Siamese twins?" Fred asked in a monotone that Harry had never heard either of the twins use before.

"We thought it was hilarious," George informed him in the same monotone, "as He ripped us apart."

"He made me watch," Remus said in a hollow tone, "as He tore off each of her limbs and cut into her skin. He made me watch her die. But He just killed me with the Avada Kedavra, saying that as a werewolf I didn't deserve more than that."

"The pain I went through as He twisted my body," Mrs. Weasley said in a slow voice, "fades in comparison to the pain I went through as I was told about the deaths of my sons. I was dead before He started to kill me."

"We put our trust in you, Harry," Ron said accusingly. "How could you let this happen to us? How could you let Him destroy my family?"

"We took you in as our own," Mr. Weasley said harshly as he passed. "We treated you as our own and worried for you as if you were ours. How could you fail to protect us? How could you let Him do this to us?"

"I tried to protect you, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly and weakly from where he hung between the two Weasleys' grips. "But He was

too strong for me, I grew too old. I let Him destroy me and then you. I let Him destroy the world.”

The three women stopped and everyone else stopped also. “Look at us Harry!” Hermione commanded in a hurt and devastated voice. “Look at what He did to us!”

“He broke us, Harry,” Thia told him crushed. “He tortured us until we broke.”

“He let them... You let them...” Ginny’s voice cracked and she broke into sobs. Harry’s knees finally gave out and he fell to the ground. “How could you let this happen, luv?” she asked, her voice filled with a sense of betrayal.

“You let Him rape my sister!” Bill accused Harry. “You let Him allow his Death Eaters to rape her!”

“They raped Hermione!” Ron screamed from Harry’s left. “You let them rape the two most important girls in my life!”

Harry felt his back give way under the guilt and grief. He felt each of their accusations and condemnations and fell to the ground face forward. How could he allow this to happen? How could he allow Voldemort the chance to kill each and everyone he loved?

“I’m sorry,” he stated from the ground.

“That’s not good enough!” Bill yelled back. “It won’t bring any of us back!”

Harry sat up in his bed soaked in cold sweat. He wasn’t screaming, but he didn’t know why he wasn’t. He headed downstairs and walked out the door and into the night. The cold air shocked his body and he stopped trembling. He went back inside and sat in front of the fire staring into the flames. He wished that he could go fly or at least climb one of the towers.

He knew the dream was false, because Ron was sleeping in the bed across from Harry, quite alive. He wanted to know if that was a dream sent by Voldemort or if it was a dream made up by his subconscious. If it was the latter, he wondered why he would dream of such horrid deaths for his friends. If it was from Voldemort, he wondered how the monster had gotten into his mind in the first place.

What should he do? He'd never be able to leave the Weasleys and even if he did, Voldemort would never take them off his death list. He would have to learn to protect them. That's all he could do.

"Luv, wake up," Ginny said shaking him awake. "What are you doing down here?" she asked once he sat up. He turned bleary eyes towards her and smiled.

"Hey, Gin," he said quietly. "I came down here to think and I fell asleep."

"What were you thinking about?" she asked just as quietly, glancing at the door. "Only mum and dad are up, but they're in the kitchen."

"Nothing much, I just couldn't sleep, so I came down here to think," Harry answered. "Ron's snores are too loud to allow me to think clearly." Ginny laughed but looked at him worriedly. "It was just nightmares," Harry whispered to her. She wasn't convinced though; she saw the look that passed over his face and knew he was lying.

"What did you dream about?" Ginny asked gently.

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry said evasively. She glared at him. "It was just something stupid my mind made up and it's not worth repeating." Ginny nodded, but Harry could tell she wasn't convinced. They walked into the kitchen hand in hand and sat at the table.

Harry watched as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley talked to one another, but he knew that there was some unspoken conversation going on between the two. Harry could understand how Ginny knew so much about love; it filled the room and flowed between Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

The day went by too quickly in Harry's opinion. They spent it flying in the orchard, skating on the pond, and making snowmen. Charlie was leaving the next day, so a little family party was scheduled for that evening. Harry enjoyed the food and company greatly. He even managed to out eat both George and Ron by eating eleven pieces of cake.

Harry and Ron headed to bed an hour or so after midnight and were the last two up. They had been in the middle of a chess game when everyone else had headed to bed, but neither wanted to give up. They fell into their beds tiredly and both were asleep almost instantly.

Harry had the same dream as the one from the night before and woke up quivering. This time he just stuck his head out the window and let the cold air calm him. He crawled back into bed and fell back asleep.

Harry cast his glance over the devastation before him. It was a small village or, rather, it had been a small village. Now it was completely destroyed and burnt to the ground. Death Eaters were all around the charred wreck and were still casting spells at the few survivors.

Harry felt his scar explode in pain and wished that he didn't have to see this Revelry. Voldemort turned to look at the devastation behind him and saw a slightly smaller figure stand up from a body.

"Draco," he called out in his cold voice, "how are you enjoying your first Revelry?"

Draco fell to his knees and crawled forward slightly. "I'm honored to be here, my Lord. I'm enjoying it." Voldemort laughed and strode closer to the boy.

"If you'd like, I'll let you play with Potter's girl once we capture her," Voldemort informed the boy.

"I'll look forward to that time then," Draco replied and Harry felt his own anger increase. Then Draco glanced up quickly and then looked down. Harry was confused with the look in the boy's eyes and so was

Voldemort. "Look at me, boy!" he commanded. Draco slowly lifted his eyes. "Legilimens!"

He searched through Draco's mind and found all the times Draco had lusted for Ginny. "I thought you'd be pleased with that gift," Voldemort said as he dropped the spell. "For a moment there I thought you were lying."

"Never, my Lord," Draco said, fear creeping into his voice.

"No, but you'll only get her if you complete your task properly," Voldemort said sternly. "Don't fail me."

"I won't, my Lord," Draco replied nervously.

"Have you killed yet?" Voldemort asked.

"Yes, my Lord," Draco answered proudly. "This boy was my work," he said pointing at the still figure next to him.

"Very well. Go and enjoy the night." Voldemort watched as the boy scampered away. He watched as Draco levitated a hiding man to an unbelievable height and then dropped him. The man hit the ground and died instantly. Voldemort laughed in pleasure and Harry felt more pain rip across his scar. He turned and watched as a Death Eater killed the young woman he had been torturing just moments before. He laughed and watched in pleasure as his Death Eaters killed off the rest. "Morsmordre!" The Dark Mark rose into the sky and Harry woke with a start gasping for breath.

"What are you doing down here?" Ginny asked Harry an hour later. He had gone downstairs and sat in the corner trying to figure Draco out.

"Just thinking," he answered truthfully, but incompletely. He placed his wand back into his sock. He had been playing with it absently as he thought about what he wanted to do to Draco once break ended. "What are you doing up?"

"I decided to wake up and check on you," she told him. "If you were down here I was going to sit with you." Harry smiled at her. "So what are you thinking about?" she asked sitting against the wall.

"The Revelry I saw tonight," Harry answered. He held a hand up to stop Ginny's next question. "Don't ask me what it was about. It's connected to the Christmas Eve vision and I'm not telling anyone about that." She nodded and they sat in silence.

"Have you used my gift yet?" she asked after awhile.

"No," he answered. "I haven't had any time alone to write in it." Ginny nodded and they sat in silence. Harry watched her carefully. She looked so pretty and Harry was surprised that she wasn't wearing a dressing gown over her pajamas. She was in a blue tank top that had been darker at one point and he noticed the straps of the sports bra she was wearing underneath. She was also in thin flannel pajama bottoms that settled low on her hips. He gulped and turned his attention away from her body.

He thought of his dreams the past two nights and remembered the hidden threats in them. Was he worth the risk to her? He didn't know what he'd do without her, but if she was safer without him, maybe he should distance himself from her. No, that wouldn't work; Voldemort would still go after her. And anyways, he wasn't going to lose such an important person by choice.

They sat in silence with their own thoughts. Harry realized how much her presence calmed his fears and steadied his thoughts. "Thanks for being down here, Gin," he told her quietly. "It beats sitting here alone."

"Don't mention it, luv," she said with a smile. They sat in silence again and after a long while a clock in the house chimed the hour.

"I think I'm heading to bed," he said standing up. "Thanks for sitting here with me, Gin."

"I told you not to mention it, luv." He smiled at her and helped her up. "I wish you'd tell me what's bothering you though, luv."

"I'm sorry, Gin," he told her sadly. "I can't, not yet at least." She smiled at him in understanding and then pulled his neck towards her. They kissed passionately and broke only for air.

"Wha's tha' for?" Harry asked surprised and breathless. She pointed up and Harry saw that the mistletoe was still up. He smiled at her. "You know, the last time I kissed a girl under the mistletoe, she was crying." Ginny hit him hard.

"Do you have any idea how rude it is to talk about ex-girlfriends on a date?" she asked in a mock angry voice.

"Yeah, that same ex-girlfriend talked about her dead ex-boyfriend on Valentine's Day," Harry said lowering his lips to hers. She didn't resist him, but instead deepened the kiss. Harry held her close to him and forgot about the troubles life held.

He broke the kiss for a breath, but descended once again. They stumbled over to the couch, completely out of control of their actions. Harry sat Ginny down onto the couch. He trailed kisses along her neck and sat next to her. He returned to her lips and they kissed for long moments, unaware of the time passing.

"What the bloody hell is going on here?" Ron's furious voice carried into the room. Harry and Ginny sprang apart, Ginny pulling her shirt down and Harry glancing around the room for his.

"Nothing," Ginny tried to say, but her voice broke halfway through the word.

"Potter, what the hell were you doing with my sister?" Ron asked Harry, livid. Harry gulped and spotted his shirt a few feet in front of Ron who stood a few feet into the room.

"We, um," Harry stopped and looked at Ginny. She was beet red and Harry knew he was just as embarrassed. "We just got a little carried away."

"It sure looks like it!" Ron yelled. Ginny walked over and stood in front of Harry, but he couldn't decide if that helped the situation or not.

"Get out!" Ron yelled, but Harry couldn't tell whom he was talking to. "Get out, Potter! I trusted you with her and you... you...."

"We did not!" Ginny replied angrily.

"You would have!" Ron retorted incensed.

"We would not have!" Harry replied angrily his face growing even redder. "I'd never do that to her or you, Ron!"

"Then what the bloody hell was going on?" he asked again. Harry was still at a loss for words. He couldn't figure out what had happened. "Get out," Ron said in a quiet, dangerous tone.

"Don't threaten him, Ron!" Ginny said angrily. "It was my fault as much as his."

"I'll deal with you later," Ron told her in the same tone.

"Don't threaten her," Harry said drawing his wand from his sock. "Go ahead and beat me up, I don't care, but don't you dare touch her!"

Ron looked at Harry surprised and then drew his wand. "And why do you think you have any right to protect her?"

"Because she's my friend, my girlfriend, and my best friend's little sister," Harry answered evenly. "I'd die for any of you, but I won't let anyone threaten Gin." Harry felt her hand grab his healed left hand and he squeezed it.

"You're not my best friend!" Ron screamed at him angrily. "Best friends don't try to shag each others little sisters!"

"I wasn't trying to shag her!" Harry screamed back. There was a long stand off, neither boy saying or making a move. Ginny glared at her brother, but didn't move from in front of Harry.

"What is going on here?" Remus's angry voice came from the doorway. Harry withered slightly as he saw Bill, Charlie, Fred, George, Mr. Weasley, and at the back Mrs. Weasley. He knew that the brothers guessed something near the truth by the murderous looks that covered their faces. Remus and Tonks (who was standing next to Remus in the doorway) kept the other brothers out of the room.

"I don't know," Ron asked sarcastically. "Why don't you ask Potter?" Ginny took a step forward, but Harry held her back. He leaned his mouth next to her ear so that he could whisper in it.

"Don't hit him," he told her, "because they'll all start firing at me." She glanced up at him and nodded. He turned to the now livid brothers standing in the hallway and sighed. "I have to date a girl with five older brothers," he whispered to her. She smiled and laughed quietly. "If they promise to behave or, at least, not to try to kill me," Harry spoke to Tonks and Remus, "they can come in."

None of the brothers said anything and Remus decided to keep them out in the hallway. Bill tried to push past, but Tonks hit him below the belt causing him to double over in pain.

"Nothing happened," Harry told them honestly. "And nothing would have happened." He wished Mr. and Mrs. Weasley weren't in the hallway also.

"It sure didn't look like nothing to me," Ron said angrily. "I come looking for Harry and I find him on top of Ginny pulling her shirt up." Harry felt his cheeks redden and knew Ginny was just as embarrassed. He stepped from out behind her and put his wand in the waistband of his pajama pants.

"Nothing else happened," Harry clarified raising his hands in submission. "We just got a little carried away, that's all." Tonks and Remus braced against the pushing brothers and Ron took a step forward.

"Stop it!" Ginny yelled at them, grabbing Harry's wand from his waistband. "I was okay with that and most of it was my idea!" she yelled at her stunned brothers. "Leave Harry alone, or I'll hex you all."

Harry tried to keep his smile off his face, but couldn't. He loved the power she had over her brothers when she held a wand in her left hand. They went still and calmed down. "That's better."

"It's not just her fault or her idea," Harry said honestly. "And it's not like I was complaining—"

"Harry, shut up," Ginny told him turning around. "I'm trying to get you out of deep trouble," she whispered so that only he could hear, "and you're not helping." He closed his mouth and let her talk. "It was mostly my idea. Though I completely agree that it got carried away. I'm sorry, mum," she said to her stunned mother, who had pushed her way to the front of the pack and past Remus.

"I want both of you to go to your rooms, now," she told them sternly. "And I want you boys to go into the kitchen now!" They all departed to go to their designated places, Harry stooping to pick up his shirt as he passed. He smiled at Ginny reassuringly as she entered her room and then climbed the rest of the stairs to the room he shared with Ron.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Aftermath

I never could've seen this far.
I never could've seen this coming.
Seems like my world's falling apart.
Simple Plan: Perfect World

When Harry entered the bedroom he was surprised to see that the sun was already above the horizon. He glanced at the clock and was surprised to see that it was almost eight. How long had he and Ginny been talking and snogging?

Harry's thoughts turned to what had happened. He had lost control, that was true, but he hadn't tried to stop it. And neither had Ginny. How could she be so sure that it wouldn't have gone farther? He sure didn't want it to and he knew the Weasley brothers would beat him into a pulp if he did. But he couldn't convince himself that they would have. He knew he wouldn't pressure Ginny into sex, but she wasn't stopping him from taking her shirt off.

The other question that was bothering him was how angry Ron really was. Was it just shock or was it more than that? "You're not my best friend!" Did Ron really mean that? What would life be like without Ron there to laugh at it with? Was dating Ginny worth losing Ron?

He thought about the calming effect she had on him. He thought clearer with her around and he could talk things through without being interrupted. That's the only complaint he had with Ron and Hermione; they interrupted too often. Ron was always angry or surprised by whatever Harry said and Hermione wanted to fix the problem before she knew what it was.

"Ginny," Mrs. Weasley yelled from downstairs. "I told you to stay in your room. Get back up there! I will talk to you after I'm done with the boys!"

His door opened and Mr. Weasley and Remus entered. Harry felt his face pale as he saw the look on Mr. Weasley's face; the man wasn't happy. "Sit, Harry," Remus told him and Harry took a seat on his bed. Remus sat on Ron's bed but Mr. Weasley stayed standing.

Harry waited for them to speak first, but he was getting more nervous as the silence grew longer. He shuffled his feet and stared out the window. "I'm not sure what happened," Mr. Weasley started. Harry looked at him surprised, his voice wasn't angry, but disappointed. Harry looked back out the window as Mr. Weasley continued. "I've stood up for you to each of my sons telling them they should trust you. Now, you'll have to gain their trust on your own and you'll need to earn ours also."

Harry ran his fingers through his hair and the guilt on his face was almost unbearable for the two men to watch. "I didn't mean for it to go so far," Harry told them in a small voice. "It's never happened before."

"Have you talked about it?" Remus asked neutrally.

"Yeah," Harry answered. The two men looked at the young man surprised. "We both agreed that we weren't ready for it."

"You've actually talked about it?" Mr. Weasley asked in a low quiet tone. Harry nodded, confused.

"Why is that so important?" he asked after the two adults traded looks.

"Most teens don't," Remus answered. "Especially with their first girlfriends. And, no, Cho doesn't count," Remus added when Harry opened his mouth to point her out.

"It also makes me wonder how this happened then," Mr. Weasley said deep in thought.

"We just got carried away," Harry answered with a shrug. "I know it's not an excuse, but I don't think either of us were thinking properly." Remus smiled.

"How do you know it wouldn't have gone farther?" Remus asked Harry pointedly.

"Because... I don't know," Harry said, running his fingers through his hair. "I just know it wouldn't have happened. I don't think that will

happen again either,” he added after a thought. “I’m really sorry I lost your trust, Mr. Weasley. Your respect for me means the world to me. I really like Ginny and I don’t want to hurt her or you and Mrs. Weasley or her brothers. I wish that we hadn’t gotten carried away.” Mr. Weasley gave Harry a piercing gaze and Harry tried his hardest to return it honestly.

“What were you both doing down there?” Remus asked after a moment.

Harry looked at his feet and felt a blush creep onto his face; he didn’t want to admit to these men that he had problems with dreams. Mr. Weasley misinterpreted this and, taking two steps, he stood in front of Harry. “What were you doing down there?” he asked in the same dangerous tone Ron had used.

“Nothing,” Harry said slightly alarmed. “It wasn’t a meeting or anything. I’ve been having really bad nightmares for the past few days and Ginny can tell that somehow. She woke me up yesterday morning because I had fallen asleep on the couch where I had gone to think.” Mr. Weasley took a deep breath and took a step backwards. “She said that she wanted to keep me company tonight so that I wasn’t alone.” Mr. Weasley nodded and turned towards the door. “How are her brothers?” he asked hesitantly.

“I’d stay away from them, if I were you,” Remus said with a laugh and left. Harry sat in the room thinking about the situation. Today would be a very long day if he had to hide from the majority of the people who lived here. He thought about Ginny and wondered how she was doing. He decided to go check on her. He opened the door and crept down the stairs. He opened her door slightly, but froze when he heard Mrs. Weasley start asking Ginny a question.

“And how can you be so sure that it wouldn’t have gone farther?” she asked. He could just see Ginny through the crack he had made in the door. Her cheeks were red beyond comparison and she looked at her mother pleadingly. “I want an answer, Ginevra,” Mrs. Weasley said sternly.

“Because it wouldn’t have, mum,” Ginny answered honestly. “Harry knows where I stand on this issue. He would never pressure me into anything I didn’t want to do. I’m only fifteen, mum. I don’t want that. Harry doesn’t. I know it wouldn’t have gone farther ‘cause it wouldn’t have.”

“I’m disappointed in you, Ginny,” Mrs. Weasley said sadly. “You and Harry are good for each other, but you both need to learn to control yourselves. You both have lost control before, and that’s just this break. I don’t want you both to do something you’re going to regret.”

Ginny nodded and spotted Harry through the door. She didn’t acknowledge him, but instead said, “Will I be able to see Harry at all today?”

Mrs. Weasley sighed. “Yes, you may. Your father and brothers might not trust you, but I do. Every young couple makes mistakes and I believe neither of you want to make this one again. Just don’t leave Harry alone with your brothers. I’m more worried about what they may do to him. Are you angry with your brothers for taking their anger out on you and Harry?”

“Yeah, it’s not fair,” Ginny stated. “It’s not like they haven’t done something like this before me. Or something worse,” she finished angrily.

“Then you need to follow by your own rules and not retaliate,” Mrs. Weasley told her. “I’ve already had words with them about their behavior. Now I’m telling you. Be civil. No hexing. No fights. Handle this with maturity and you’ll gain your father’s trust back. It’ll be hard, I know that,” Mrs. Weasley said sympathetically, “but if you truly believe that you are in the right, then there’s no reason to waste your energy on their accusations.”

“But—” Ginny started, before her mother cut her off.

“No but’s about this, Ginny. Behave yourself. Use the maturity you say you have.” Mrs. Weasley gave Ginny a hug. Pulling out the hug just enough to see her daughter’s face, Mrs. Weasley continued, “I know you want to hex them, but that’s the childish thing to do. Just

like screaming at you both without really listening to you or thinking was a very childish thing for Ron to do. Now, breakfast will be ready in half an hour. Why don't you get dressed and come down for it?" Harry heard Mrs. Weasley stand up and he hurried up the stairs.

When he was positive that she was gone, he walked back to Ginny's room and knocked this time. She told him to come in and Harry entered the room hesitantly. They smiled at each other embarrassedly and awkwardly.

"So," she finally said with a smile, "how long were you listening?" Harry smiled at her, but felt his cheeks burn.

"I heard the reason why you were so positive we wouldn't go farther," he said quietly and Harry saw a soft blush creep onto her cheeks. "Thanks for defending me," he offered gratefully. "But you still have my wand and I'd like it back."

She laughed and handed him his wand. Harry fingered it and then stuck it back into his waistband. "So what do you think?" she asked after an uncomfortable pause.

"About what?" Harry asked.

"About what happened before Ron came downstairs?" she clarified, with a deeper blush covering her cheeks.

Harry felt his own blush and thought about how to answer. "I can't say I didn't enjoy it, 'cause I did," he answered after a moment. "But we can't do it again. Your mum's right, we can't lose control like that." Ginny nodded. Harry looked at her and debated asking his question. He decided to and asked it. "Would you really have let me take your shirt off?" he asked slowly, completely embarrassed.

Ginny looked at him startled and her whole face turned red. "Yeah," she whispered. "But that was it. And I had a sports bra on, so it wouldn't be so bad." Harry looked away from her, trying not to think of Ginny just in a bra. She laughed and jumped up. She ran over to him and hugged him. "Sorry, luv. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

Harry laughed with her and hugged her back. She stepped away and Harry looked at her. She was still in her pajamas and he could feel her working her magic on him again. "I'm going to go get dressed," he told her hurriedly. "Can you bring breakfast up to me in Ron's room? I don't think it's a good idea to see your brothers quiet yet."

"Sorry about them," she apologized. "But I think you should face them sooner, rather than later. It'll make you look guilty if you hide away from them." Harry nodded, but gulped. "How about this, we go down together and if they give you a hard time, I'll hex them."

"My knight in shining armor," he teased her. "Alright, I'll go down with you, but you can't hex them, or your mum'll kill you. How 'bout you meet me in the hall in five minutes?" She nodded and Harry briefly kissed her lips. "See you."

Ten minutes later (Ginny had taken longer to get dressed) they entered the kitchen hand in hand. Each brother glared at them suspiciously, anger written across their faces. Harry realized that Ron wasn't even looking at them. He was determinedly not looking at Harry and was eating his breakfast in silence.

"Good morning, Harry, Ginny," Mrs. Weasley said as if nothing had happened earlier. "It's nice to see you both."

"Morning, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said. "Morning, everyone." Tonks and Remus replied in fashion, Mr. Weasley nodded at him, but the oldest brothers just grunted; Ron didn't even do that. Harry felt a stone drop into his stomach and knew that Ron was angrier than he had ever been with him before.

Breakfast was an uncomfortable affair. The adults tried to get the others to talk about mundane things like the weather. It didn't work and Harry was getting nervous with all the glares that he received from the brothers. Finally, Charlie rose and went upstairs. He returned with his suitcase and kissed his mother goodbye. He shook hands with his father, brothers, Tonks, and Remus. He kissed Ginny on the cheek. He glared at Harry and then took out his wand. He left the house and apparated away.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged a look and Harry felt awful. Charlie had looked at him with hate and condemnation. It reminded him of the dream he had had two nights in a row and the look he had received from each of the brothers during it. He stood up and told everyone that he was going for his morning run.

When he came back, he snuck up the stairs and took a shower. He entered the room he shared with Ron and stopped in his tracks. Ron was sitting at his desk staring out the window. He turned and saw Harry standing in the doorway. Harry grabbed some clothes, hoped they matched, put them on, and then fled out of the room.

The day was the longest Harry had had this break. Not one of the brothers would talk to Harry and they would drag Ginny away any time she tried to talk to him. Tonks would burst out laughing at that and Harry felt like silencing her because it only made it worse.

Harry went to bed early, but didn't sleep well. What he would have given to dream of Ginny, but instead he dreamt of all that went wrong in his life. He woke up several times in the night, waking Ron up most of the time as well. Ron didn't appreciate that, but didn't say anything to Harry, not even to yell at him.

"Hey, Ron, Harry!" Hermione greeted them happily the next morning at the train station. She gave Harry a quick hug, but quickly turned her attention to Ron. "I missed you, Ron," she told him as she kissed his cheek. The parents were talking to each other and Harry noticed the Order members that were now present on the platform.

Hermione stepped away and looked over the group. Her sharp mind realized that the Weasley boys weren't happy with Harry or Ginny, who weren't even holding hands. She didn't say anything, but she gave a quizzical look.

"Later," Ginny mouthed to her and she said goodbye to each of her brothers. She hugged her parents and said goodbye to Remus and Tonks. The train whistled and Hermione, Ginny, Ron, and Harry hurried onto the train.

The two girls entered a compartment, but Ron wouldn't let Harry in. "I'm not sitting with him," he told the girls pointedly and Harry turned away to find Neville. He heard Hermione lay into Ron, but he knew that it would be better if he just let Ron work it out.

Ginny hurriedly caught up with him and they found Neville with Luna, Dean, and Seamus. "You guys mind if we sit in here?" she asked as they entered. "My brother's being a prat and Hermione's yelling at him for it." Neville and the others shook their heads no and the two took the last seats in the compartment.

Harry spent the trip unhappily away from his two best friends and he wished that Ron were more forgiving. He knew Ron and Hermione had gotten carried away once, because Ginny told him about it.

The feast in the Great Hall was delicious, but it didn't go unnoticed that the golden trio wasn't sitting near each other. Harry and Ginny sat next to her fifth year friends and Ron sat farther up the table next to no one in particular. Hermione, who was furious with both boys, sat with the other sixth year girls.

Thia gave Harry a confused look, but he didn't respond to it. He'd tell her Tuesday night. Snape smiled vindictively at their predicament. The other Gryffindors all wondered why and the rumors of old were brought up again. Other students wondered if the Prophet was right and Ron new the truth of Harry's loyalties.

Harry left the table as soon as the plates cleaned themselves and they were dismissed. He saw Ginny say goodbye to her friends and then she hurried after him. They walked up to the common room together, Harry saying goodbye once they were at the steps to the dormitories.

"See you in the morning," he whispered. She smiled and kissed his cheek.

"See you," she whispered back, heading up to her dorm. He pretended to walk up the stairs, but instead waited until he heard the door to the girls' dorm shut. He hurried out of the common room with

her gift and nearly ran to the Room of Requirement. He needed to think about this whole mess and try to figure out what to do about it.

He opened the door once it appeared and walked to a spot near the edge of the water. He looked out to the stormy sea and thought about his problems. He knew Hermione was angry with Ron, but she wasn't happy with him either. Would Ginny be able to fix the rift between Hermione and him? He didn't know what he'd do without both of his friends.

He opened the journal and realized that there was writing on the first page.

Dear Luv,

I didn't want my brothers to see this, so I borrowed this book to write a letter to you. I'd rather this be kept between you and me, but whatever you write in here is for you to share with whom ever you want.

You seem to be floundering and have been for a while. I try to pull you back to shore and you usually come, but something always pushes you back out. Let us help you and we will.

I realized as you lay dying in the infirmary that I'd hate a life without you. I don't care if this is just some crush that'll wear off in time, but if it does I hope we'll still be friends of the strongest type. I don't think I'll ever stop loving you as a friend, luv, and I hope you never will either.

Thanks for your mum's ring. I really like it and it means a lot to me because it was hers. Your parents had a deep love for one another and I hope one day you'll be able to see the love that still surrounds you.

Don't be afraid to write in here about everything that's bothering you. As long as you don't throw it down Moaning Myrtle's toilet, no one should find it. Writing does help and I promise that some future Dark Lord isn't trapped inside these pages. I hope it helps.

Love,

Ginny

Harry stared at the letter. He couldn't figure out when she had taken the journal, but she obviously had. He thought about his plans for the journal and then came to a decision; he'd write a letter to her and then give to her, back and forth. Some things were easier to write than to say, particularly for him.

Dear Gin,

Thanks for the letter; I'm still trying to figure out when you took it though. I was wondering if you wanted to write letters to each other? I'd like to and there are some things that would be easier to write.

So, Ron is truly mad at me this time. And Hermione seems mad at both of us. I don't know what I'd do if I lost just one of them, but both. Ron and Hermione have gotten me through the first five years here in one piece. Sure, I had to grow a few bones and spend a few weeks in the hospital wing, but at least I survived.

Ron is so infuriating. I know he and Hermione make out and I know they've gotten carried away (thanks to you) and I know he's only upset because he still sees you as his eleven-year-old sister. Or maybe he thinks of you younger than that, I don't know. The same goes with your other brothers, but they'll cool off or get worse with separation from me, but I can't change that. But Ron... I'll see him every day and it's going to wear me down if he doesn't talk to me.

Thinking back to Saturday morning scares me. We just stopped thinking, or at least I did. I'm pretty sure I would have stopped if you told me to, but how can I be sure? I know you don't want to go farther than that yet and neither do I. We should talk about it a bit more or write about it. Set boundaries, you know?

Before I give this to you, I'm going to talk to Thia about protecting it from prying eyes. I don't want anyone else to read this. This is just for you and me. I think I'll risk some points and meeting Filch to talk with her tonight, but no promises.

Right now I'm in our little get away, looking out at the ocean. I'm always amazed by the power in crashing waves. The weather has calmed down since I got here and the clouds are gone. I can see the countless stars.

Well, if I'm going to go to see Thia, I need to go now. See you in the morning.

Yours,
Harry

He looked at his letter and then closed the book. He shoved it, the quill, and the ink into a pocket and stood up. He walked slowly to the door and looked once more out at the now calm sea.

"Thia," Harry said knocking. "Can I come in?" There was a muffled 'ow' and then she called a yes. Harry opened the door and nearly laughed at Thia, who was sucking her thumb. "What happened?"

"You startled me and I cut my thumb," she said, taking it out and showing him. "You want something I suppose, seeing as it's past curfew."

"Yeah, I was hoping you'd over look that," Harry said with a smile. "I was wondering where I'm to meet Lon tomorrow morning. And then Druce later that day."

"Oh, I completely forgot to tell you about that!" she said hitting her forehead with her bleeding hand. "Most of your work with Lon will happen outside, but you're to meet him in the Entrance Hall. I hope you've been running over break, because he'll run you ragged even if you did." Harry nodded that he had ran and then waited for her to bandage her finger.

"As for the other two. For now you'll meet in the Great Hall, but they're looking for rooms that satisfy their needs." Harry nodded, but didn't say anything about the journal. He wasn't sure he wanted to ask her now. "What else is there Harry? I can see it written all over your face."

Harry glanced out a window, but it was pitch dark out there and he only saw his reflection. "You know how Ginny gave me a journal for Christmas?" Thia nodded and waited for him to continue. "Well, I'd like to write her letters in them," he added shyly and Thia did all she could not to laugh at the boy's awkwardness. "But I don't want others to read it, people who would tell it around the school, you know?"

Thia nodded and thought for a moment. "So, some kind of password like the Marauder's Map?" Harry nodded. "Well, Remus will be a better person to ask, but you won't see him for a week, so let me think about it. If I come up with anything tonight, I'll ask you to stay after class under the pretence of talking about your new classes." Harry nodded and stood up to leave. "Wait, in order for me not to take points away from Gryffindor, I need you to answer one simple question. What's going on with you, Ron, and Hermione?"

Harry looked at her surprised, but remembered that he had silently agreed to tell her. He sat back down and thought about how to tell her. "Have you talked with any of the Weasley's, Remus, or Tonks since Friday?" Thia shook her head no. "Oh." He tried to figure out how to tell her. "Ginny and I were talking early Saturday morning or really just sitting next to each other. I've had some really bad nightmares and have gone downstairs a lot to think them through and Ginny caught on." He stopped and thought about what to say next. "Ron, um, caught us snogging."

"Well, that's not new," Thia said surprised. "Why's he so angry?"

"Well, actually, most of the Weasleys are angry at me right now," Harry told her. "You see, um, I didn't have a shirt on and I was taking off Gin's when Ron walked in." He felt his cheeks burn completely red and wished he didn't have to tell her. "What's so funny?" he asked Thia, who wasn't laughing, but the corners of her mouth were curling up against her will.

"Harry," she said and the laugh was evident in her voice. "Every couple gets walked in on at some point. Ron will calm down and so will the other Weasleys. Besides, they do like you and wouldn't have Ginny date anyone else."

"If you say so," Harry said doubting it. "Charlie didn't even say goodbye to me when he left and Ron wouldn't sit on the train with me."

"Is that why Hermione is mad?" Thia asked.

"I think so," Harry added. "But she seems mad at me too, so I'm not exactly sure. She'll tell Ginny and I'll find out that way."

"Here, let me walk you back to the dorm," Thia said after a moment. "That way you won't get in trouble." Harry nodded.

Thia walked with Harry to the Gryffindor Tower in silence. They did meet Filch and Harry was glad Thia was with him. He hadn't seen Filch in that kind of mood since Mrs. Norris was petrified.

They parted ways at the Fat Lady and Harry entered the deserted common room. He walked over to the fire and almost stayed downstairs to sleep. He wasn't looking forward to seeing Ron. He decided against that and instead walked up the stairs to their dorm.

Harry opened the door to his dorm room slowly, hoping it wouldn't squeak on its hinge. It did, but it didn't matter. Everyone was still up talking, though Ron wasn't saying anything.

"Where've you been, Harry?" Seamus asked from where he sat on his bed.

"Talking to Thia about my classes," he answered with a half-truth. Ron mumbled something, but Harry couldn't understand what he had said. Harry crossed the room, opened his trunk, and pulled out his pajamas.

"What about your classes?" Neville asked curiously. Harry stuck his head through his top and looked at Neville surprised.

"Didn't I tell you that I dropped Charms and Herbology?" Harry asked and was stunned with their no's. "Oh, I did. I'm going to take classes

from a healer and a spells master instead. And a fight trainer in the morning.”

“Man,” Dean said loudly, “why the extra classes?”

Harry looked at them and thought about telling them the Prophecy. That only lasted a split second before he decided against it. “I’ve been attacked so often and am definitely on Voldemort’s to kill list, so Professor Dumbledore and I agreed that more training would be good for me.” They nodded in understanding.

“Why didn’t you quit Potions?” Neville asked. “I would have.”

“The git saved my life and I think knowing the antidotes will be helpful,” Harry answered. “And, the spells master loves Charms so I’ll learn all I need about them from him.”

There was a silence and Harry crawled under his blankets. “So what’s up with you and Ron?” Dean asked out right. “You haven’t said a word to each other all day.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as Harry tried to figure out what to say, but he didn’t need to say anything; Ron would. “Some slimy git nearly shagged my sister Saturday morning and would have if I hadn’t walked in.”

Harry sat up in his bed and stared at Ron angrily. His cheeks were flushed, not out of embarrassment, but in anger. “I did not, Ron!” he yelled at the boy in the next bed.

“It sure looked like it to me!” Ron yelled back. The other three boys realized that Dean had set off a time bomb.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I won’t?” Harry asked loudly.

“You can say it all you want, but actions speak louder than words,” Ron replied. Harry threw his pillow at Ron, but Ron caught it deftly.

“Ron, I would never shag Gin! Never!” he yelled back. “Get that through your thick skull!”

“Then what exactly were you doing shirtless and taking off hers?” Ron asked standing up to face Harry better.

“I told you, we got carried away, but it wouldn’t have gone farther than that!” Harry yelled, his embarrassment evident in his voice.

“You’ll have to excuse me because I don’t believe you!” Ron yelled at Harry. “You put her in danger just by dating her and now you try and shag her! You’re just sick, Harry!” Harry jumped off his bed and faced Ron, his anger radiating off him.

“You... I... Never...” Harry stopped and took a deep breath to calm down enough to speak fluently. “I know about the danger, Ron,” Harry said in a voice low and dangerous and Ron took a step back. “I know about that, but I’d fall apart if she wasn’t even my friend and the only way to protect her is by pretending to hate her. I can’t do that,” Harry said in a heartbreaking tone and the other boys were surprised with the amount of emotion there. “I’ve lost so many, Ron, how can you want to take her away from me?” He grabbed a blanket and pillow and left the dorm. He would sleep on the couch tonight.

“Harry what are you doing down here?” Hermione asked early the next morning. He had just awoken and was planning on getting dressed for his class with Lon soon. He only had half an hour to get to the Entrance Hall and didn’t want to be late.

“Ron and I had a... a...” He stopped and tried to find the right words.

“A yelling match?” Hermione asked. Harry nodded and Hermione sat down on the couch next to him. “He’s blowing this way out of proportion.”

“I don’t know,” Harry told her uncertainly. “I think it just brings other things out more. He brought up the danger I pose to her last night.”

“He didn’t!” Hermione asked surprised and angered.

“He did and I agree to an extent,” Harry told her. “I’ve thought about that since that shopping trip and the only way I can think of to get rid of that threat is by not being friends with you guys.”

“Harry Potter, do not turn your backs on us!” Hermione told him sternly.

“I won’t,” Harry assured her. “I need you guys to get through this and without you, Ron, or Ginny I don’t think I will.” Hermione looked at him sadly. “Anyway I don’t think it would fool Voldemort. I’d have to pretend to absolutely hate you all.” Harry looked at her and saw a little bit of respect in her eyes, but she was still angry. “What are you angry about?”

Hermione sighed and thought for a bit. “You know, Ron’s been worried this would happen for a long time. And I always told him not to worry because both you and Ginny are smart people and well controlled.” Harry snorted a laugh and she smiled. “Yeah, well, you are.”

“So why are you angry?” Harry asked again.

“Because you just blow their concern off like it doesn’t really matter,” Hermione told him honestly. “Harry,” she said putting a hand up to stop his arguments, “I know you do care, but only to a point. You see the Weasleys as brothers or surrogate parents and you’re like a brother to all of the Weasleys, or a son, except for Ginny. She’s the only one to see you like you are underneath.”

“I’m not different—” Harry started but Hermione interrupted.

“Yes, you are, Harry,” she told him honestly. “You’ve built walls around yourself, your true self, and you hide behind them. Ginny’s the only one to see past those, because she’s the only one you let in or she’s the only one who has broken past them. I think it’s great, Harry, that you have someone you can talk to. But it undermines your relationship with Ron. And it makes them not trust you completely. Ron is the only one who really knew you before the newer walls were built. The twins kind of knew you, but they also know you have these walls. None of them really know who you are anymore; you’ve

changed a lot since the newer, higher walls were put up. It freaks them out because they're entrusting their little sister to you and then you do something like this." She stopped and looked around. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Harry looked around the room and rolled his eyes. "We were sitting together, when I decided to go back to bed. No one had taken the mistletoe down and Ginny kissed me, because we were under it. I don't really know what happened after that. When Ron came in, Ginny had already taken my shirt off and I was in the process of taking hers off."

"How did you get on top of Ginny?" Hermione asked a completely embarrassed Harry. "I'm trying to figure out who's lying and who's not, Harry. And this way I know what happened so that I can tell Ron the truth."

"We were on the couch and Ginny leaned back," Harry answered completely humiliated. "I just followed." Hermione nodded. "Why will this help?"

"Because Ron's blaming the whole thing on you," she answered, "but I know Ginny well enough to know that she wouldn't do anything she wasn't comfortable with. That's what Ginny told me, what happened, I mean."

Harry nodded. "So why are you mad at me?" he asked for the third time.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Ron has reasons to be worried; any older brother does. You just blow them off and don't take them seriously."

"Why should I take his worries seriously?" Harry asked slightly angry. "I'm not going to sleep with Ginny."

"But accidents happen, Harry," she said quietly. She looked around the room. "Ron and I almost went all the way."

"Yeah, Ginny told me about that," Harry told her.

"No, not that time, that was a heavy snog" Hermione said embarrassed. "This was in November, when we were doing one of our rounds. Anyway, it freaked both of us out and Ron's worried that you guys won't get interrupted."

"What?" Harry asked loudly. Hermione gave him a stern glare and Harry apologized. "Sorry. How were you guys interrupted?"

"Peeves flew by singing that horrid song he had made up for you and Ginny," Hermione said with a faint smile. "Luckily he didn't find us or the whole school would know."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Harry asked.

"Would you tell Ron, even if he wasn't Ginny's brother?" Harry shook his head no. "Then why do you think we would?"

"Oh, ok," Harry said in understanding. "Ginny can take care of herself though. She could beat me up if she really wanted to and I don't want to be on the receiving end of one of her hexes. I don't see why they worry so much for her."

"Because, and I know this is unfair," Hermione prefaced her answer, "but they all remember Ginny as a young girl, particularly Bill and Charlie. The twins are the most trusting of them and it's because they weren't as responsible for Ginny as the older two were and they weren't as close to her as Ron is. The brothers don't see her as the competent witch she is, but as some young little girl in need of protection. Just learn to work with the fears."

Harry nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but he never said what he was going to say. The clock, instead chimed the half hour and Harry stood up quickly.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Harry yelled back to her as he went up the dorm steps, "but I have to go to a class. See you at breakfast or at the latest Potions." He ran up the stairs, hurriedly put his school clothes on and ran back down the stairs. Hermione was still sitting on

the couch and Harry yelled another goodbye to her. He hoped Lon wouldn't be too angry with him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Lessons

How could this happen to me?

I made my mistakes,

I've got no where to run...

So I try to hold onto a time,

When nothing mattered.

Simple Plan: Untitled

"You're late!" Lon Bryant bellowed at Harry as he ran into the Entrance Hall.

Harry skidded to a halt and desperately tried to get his breath back. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bryant," Harry panted. "I was talking to a friend about another friend and lost track of time."

"Is this other friend dying?" Lon asked shortly. Harry stared at him in surprise.

"N-no," he answered.

"Then don't be late!" he yelled impatiently. "Don't cool down! We're going for a run." Harry shook his head and followed the man out of the school and onto the grounds. They ran to the Quidditch pitch and then ran three more laps. Lon stopped near the goal posts and Harry put his hands on top of his head.

They stood, Harry trying desperately to catch his breath and Lon just barely breathing deeply. Lon was a medium sized man, well built, without an ounce of extra fat on his body. Harry could tell that Lon was in better shape than he was and Lon seemed to be ready for an attack at any moment.

"I don't want you to be late again," Lon said sharply. "I don't want to teach a lazy good for nothing teenager!" Harry bowed his head in

humiliation and promised himself that he wouldn't be late again. This man was giving up his time and energy to train him, the least he should do for this man was be on time. "You will be running around the lake twice a week before this month is up. You will be running sprints on the other days. Until the end of the month, you'll be running longer and longer distances until you're able to run around the lake."

"Okay," Harry said, dreading the time he'd spend running. "I can run a fair distance already."

"I'll be teaching you hand-to-hand combat, both unarmed and with short knives," Lon told him in his sharp voice, ignoring the comment.

"Why? I won't be fighting hand-to-hand," Harry interrupted.

"Don't interrupt me," Lon scolded Harry and hit him across the head. Harry stumbled sideways and shook his head to clear it. "You'll learn because I say so, and also because it'll help you." Harry nodded, rubbing the back of his sore head. "I'll also teach you how to throw knives and how to use the sword. Now," he said, raising his voice as he started loping across the pitch, "let's go to where we're going to practice."

Harry followed him to a clearing between the Forbidden Forest and the Lake. Harry was surprised to realize that it was the same spot where Sirius, Hermione, and he had almost been kissed by the Dementors his third year. Lon slowly waved his wand at the ground, clearing a circle about twenty feet wide of snow.

"Now, what are we doing, Mr. Bryant?" Harry asked curiously.

"First, don't call me Mr. anything," Lon answered grumpily. "Call me Bryant. Second, don't ask questions unless I ask you to. Understand?" Harry nodded. "Good. Now what do you know about fighting, Muggle style?"

"Nothing," Harry admitted. "Nothing worthwhile at least."

Bryant shook his head in frustration. He walked to the edge nearest the forest and came back with two whittled sticks. Bryant tossed one

at Harry and he caught it by reflex. Harry looked at the stick with uncertainty, but raised it immediately as Bryant swung his at Harry's head.

Harry managed to defend against that one, but Bryant swept his feet from under him with the next swing. Harry landed hard and knew he'd have a bruised back. Bryant waited impatiently as Harry stood and then attacked again, this time feinting for Harry's left shoulder, but quickly changing to smack Harry's right thigh.

Harry gritted his teeth as a sharp pain escalated up from his thigh. They continued sparing, Harry barely managing to defend against less than half the strokes. When Bryant finally let his stick drop Harry sank gratefully down to his knees.

"Get up," Bryant barked. "Run to the Quidditch pitch, touch the far goal post and then run up to the castle. I'll be waiting for you there." Harry muttered a curse under his breath, but stood and started the long jog to the Quidditch pitch.

"What's the matter, luv?" Ginny asked almost thirty minutes later as Harry limped into the Great Hall.

"Nothing, I'm just sore," he answered in reply to her concerned look. He smiled at her and took the seat next to her. "I just got the crap beaten out of me by Bryant and I now have a nice collection of fine bruises."

"I'm sorry," she whispered in his ear. "You want to do something at the end of the week?"

Harry shook his head regretfully. "I'd love to, but I was planning to have the D.A. meeting that night and I don't think it's a wise idea to do things without at least one chaperone." Ginny crossed her arms sullenly, but Harry only laughed. "I'm just joking. I do have a surprise for you, but it's not ready yet," he told her to make up for the bad joke. "When it's done, I'll take you out."

Ginny's face lit up with a grin and she looked at him expectantly. "What is it?"

"I can't tell you yet, Gin," he said, shaking his head in amusement; Ginny loved surprises and gifts. "You'll have to wait until it's done." Ginny gave him a slight glare but that was it. "So how's Hermione with me?"

"She's alright," Ginny answered, grabbing some food for her plate. "She believes our side of the story over Ron's, which is how it should be seeing as we're telling the truth." Ginny shrugged. "She's mad though. She said something about you brushing their concern off and all that, but I don't particularly understand it."

"Neither did I," Harry said, buttering a piece of toast. "We talked this morning before my lesson and she tried to explain it to me."

Ginny nodded, "Yeah, that's what she said. I forgot you had a lesson in the morning."

"So did I," Harry answered after swallowing the bite of toast he had just taken. "At least not until last night, after I said goodnight to you. I realized I didn't know where I was having lessons, so I went and talked to Thia about it and she told me."

"Oh, okay," she replied with a slight smile. "How's Ron?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen him since last night," Harry said with a shrug. "We had another fight about you."

"I wish he'd just back off," Ginny said furiously. "He's just annoying."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "The only problem is that Dean, Seamus, and Neville heard it all and heard what happened in an incomplete way." Ginny's cheeks burned red and Harry gave her a half smile. "And I left them with Ron afterwards because I didn't want to hit him."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "So they think what?"

"I have no idea," Harry said with a shrug. "They weren't up before my lesson and I have only seen you since the end of it. I'll try and talk to them... If I don't get really embarrassed."

"You don't have to," Ginny pleaded with him. "Just let it die down. Ron will get over it eventually and if you make a big deal about it then it'll become a huge problem."

"Yeah," Harry told her very quietly. "But I don't want them to think the wrong thing about you," he whispered into her ear. "And if Ron's saying what I think he is, they might."

Ginny looked at him thoughtfully. "I didn't think about that," she told him honestly. "Don't bring it up though," she begged him. "If I know guys as well as I do, I know that they'll bring it up. Just wait for them." Harry nodded. "Promise me that you will," she asked him, pleading with her eyes.

"I promise, Gin," he said, kissing her fingertips. "I need to go get my stuff." The bell rang and Harry cursed his luck. "How mad will Snape be if I don't have my book?" he asked her curiously.

"I wouldn't put it past him to give you a month's worth of detention," she told him with a smile. "If it was me, though, I'd say I'd get away with it." Harry chuckled with her.

"I don't know," Harry said with a shrug. "He did save my life. Who could have seen that coming?" They had left the Great Hall and Ginny stopped to finish talking with him.

"Just take what he gives you," she advised him. "And don't explode at him, as you said, he did save your life. But don't let him walk all over you either."

Harry smiled at her, "And how am I supposed to keep him from strutting if I can't explode?" Ginny hit his shoulder and Harry gasped with pain.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to hit you so hard," she told him worriedly.

"No, you just hit a bruise," he assured her. "You'd better hurry to class." Ginny nodded and left, turning back to wave before she turned

a corner. Harry hurried down the stairs to the dungeon, hoping against hope that Snape would be nice to him.

Harry sat in the back, in his normal spot, and was there long before Ron. When Ron entered and saw Harry in their normal spot, he changed direction and took Neville's normal spot. Hermione gave Ron a glare and then sat next to Lavender and Parvati. Neville came in and saw Ron in his spot. He looked around the room and took the only empty seat in the room, the one next to Harry.

"Hey," Neville mumbled before taking out his book. Harry smiled his hello and looked around the dungeon trying to find Snape. "Where's your stuff?"

"I forgot it in the room," Harry told him with a shrug. "Will you return what's left of me to Ginny once Snape's through with me?" Harry asked with a smile. Neville gave a nervous laugh and glanced at Ron. "So, um, what's up with, um..."

"Quiet!" Professor Snape snapped from the doorway. "Today we start a new curriculum." Everyone glanced at one another; he seemed to be in an odd mood. "As you all know by now, thanks to Skeeter, I have been spying on the Dark Lord. Which means that I am now also free of those restraints. We will be studying the potions that the Dark Lord has had made for his personal use; ones that, until recently, were known to only a few healers and Aurors."

He swept to the front of the room and picked up a large pile of packets. He gave a packet to everyone, glaring at Harry when he saw that the boy didn't have his book. Harry looked down at the parchment and was surprised to see that it was covered with Professor Snape's handwriting and notes.

"This is your new text book for this class," Snape said once he had passed the last one out. Hermione raised her hand shakily and nervously. "Yes, Miss Granger," Snape called on her angrily.

"This is your handwriting," she said softly.

"It is," he said with a curt nod. "The reason for that, as any fool could guess, is that I created several of those on my own, helped create others, or picked through the rest. What the Dark Lord does not know is that I have worked on antidotes for most of the poisons he had ordered to be created. If I made them on my own, I didn't give the Dark Lord the poison until I had also created the antidote." He stopped and stared at the stunned class. He took a book and slammed it on his desktop. Everyone jumped, except for Harry, who was only intrigued, not surprised, by what Snape had said.

"Surely some of you had doubts as to where my loyalties lie," he said tersely. "I have been cleared of all charges because of the need for a spy among the Dark Lord's Death Eaters. Now, we will be learning the first poison. It was created by another Death Eater and slowly chews the skin away."

"Why don't you just use acid?" Dean asked without raising his hand.

"A hand, Mr. Thomas, raise your hand," Snape said shortly. "The difference between this potion and acid is that it only attacks the skin layer. It leaves the layers under the skin alone, exposing it to the elements or whatever torture the attacker decides to use after that," Snape explained. "It can be stored in any container that isn't leather, because leather is the dried skin of an animal and will be destroyed by the poison."

"That's what that was," Harry mumbled under his breath. He was thinking about Malfoy's initiation.

"What is that, Mr. Potter?" Snape snapped viciously at Harry.

"Nothing, Professor Snape," Harry gritted out.

"Where's your text book?" Snape asked vindictively.

"Right here, Professor," Harry said, holding up the packet Snape had just handed out. "I appreciate these, Professor. They should be interesting study material." Snape stared at Harry, slightly taken aback, but it only lasted for a few seconds before Snape's lips curled in a way Harry had learnt to dread.

"That's ten points for your lip, Mr. Potter," Snape said, confirming Harry's fears. "And two night's detention." Harry gritted his teeth and remembered what Ginny had said to him. He wouldn't take the bait.

The class was passed interpreting Snape's handwriting and taking notes on the properties of the poison. Harry watched the clock with growing dread. At least he knew what to expect with Snape, but with Druce Keene he had no idea. The bell rang and Harry said goodbye to Neville and headed into the Great Hall.

"Good morning, Harry," Druce Keene said from the Ravenclaw table. Harry walked over to the Ravenclaw table, but stood awkwardly across from him. "Sit, Harry, sit. I'm not going to bite your head off for sitting at the wrong table."

Harry sat and looked at the Spell Master. He was dressed in robes that were obviously old, but they were well taken care of. He had longer brown hair that was pulled back in a rather loose ponytail and bright, intelligent blue eyes. Harry decided that this man would be a good teacher, unlike Bryant and Snape.

"Now, I looked over the test that Thia gave you at the start of the year," he started in a slow measured voice. "She told me that you've mastered the spells on there that you didn't know at the beginning of the year." Harry nodded; Thia had told him that already. "I'm going to spend the rest of the class testing where your strengths are and where your weaknesses are. First," he said, pulling out a piece of parchment, "I want you to write down what you consider your strongest, weakest, most interesting, least interesting classes and where most of your knowledge is."

Harry thought about that for a while. Well, Defence Against the Dark Arts was his strongest class, most interesting, and was what he knew best. Charms was his least well-known class. History was his most boring class. "Can I put down Divination?"

"Yes," he answered with a slight smile. Harry wrote down that Divination was his worst class. "Very good, now any questions before we begin?"

"What do I call you, sir?" Harry asked, a little embarrassed.

"Call me Master Keene," he answered. "It's my work title, after all. But outside of class just call me Keene. I never liked Druce."

"Didn't Thia call you that?" Harry asked, now a little surprised.

"I call her Synthia to her face and she calls me Druce to mine," he explained. "When she's not around I call her Thia, but I'm not sure if she calls me Druce or Keene when I'm not around because I'm not around." Harry laughed and nodded. He spent the next hour or so proving to Master Keene that he knew thirty or forty different spells. He would cast the spell and then Keene would write something down on a piece of parchment. When the bell rang, Keene looked down at the parchment and then folded it neatly.

"Very good," Keene said brightly. "I'll see you tomorrow. Goodbye, Harry." Harry walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down in the same seat he had that morning.

The first thing Harry did when he entered the Dark Arts classroom was head to the Wall. He put up pictures of Aurors that had died in the Battle of Hogsmeade and of a magical family that had been slaughtered. A few others joined him, but, thankfully, not that many.

The class went by in its normal blur of dueling, right up until the end. Thia had just told Harry and Neville (the top duellers) to bow to each other when Neville stood up and put his wand away.

"Professor, what do you think about Snape?" he asked instead. The class waited for her answer.

"I think he is a true Slytherin and an extremely brave or stupid man, depending on how you look at it," Thia answered evenly.

"What do you mean?" Ron asked loudly.

"You are either extremely brave to spy on Voldemort or extremely stupid," Harry replied rolling his eyes. "I believe Professor Snape is

second on Voldemort's 'to kill' list," he added, looking at Thia, who nodded. Ron glared at Harry, but Harry just ignored him.

"Who's first and why is Snape second?" Hannah Abbot asked curiously. Harry and Thia exchanged a look, but Harry just shrugged. He didn't care about who knew anymore; at least to some extent.

"I am," Harry said looking down at his shoes. "Because of the reply I sent and the, um, wording I used. As for the reason why Professor Snape is second—" Harry stopped and thought about it for a second. "Well, Voldemort doesn't suffer traitors and kills them the second he gets his hands on them. And for good reason, or well, I mean, yeah," Harry stammered, feeling a blush rise to his cheeks. "What I meant is that Voldemort doesn't want his secrets spilled. What is the first thing Professor Snape teaches us after he's released from that role? The most secret of Voldemort's poisons. It undermines Voldemort's system and makes others think twice about their oaths and how permanent they are."

His entire class looked at Harry with surprise. Not only had he just admitted to being at the top of Voldemort's list, but he had defended Snape. Thia was looking at Harry with cold pride, sorrow written in her eyes. She didn't think any teenager should be able to answer those questions, and particularly the first one in the way he had. It just wasn't right.

"Professor Snape," Thia said, getting the attention of the class once more, "has sacrificed much while spying for our side. He deserves your respect and your trust."

"He sure hasn't acted that way," Dean said bitterly.

Harry laughed at that and Dean stared at him as if he had horns. "Sorry, I," Harry stopped and shook his head. "Sorry. As for the way Snape acts, well, he had to. I mean, no Death Eater would like Gryffindors, and least of all the famous Harry Potter," he added bitterly. "He had to act the way the Death Eaters would expect, otherwise they would see right through the disguise."

“But he gave you two detentions for forgetting your book today,” Lavender argued logically.

“Did he really?” Thia asked outraged.

“No, he gave my two detentions for my lip,” Harry corrected. “And I’m a special case,” he added with a shrug. Ron and Hermione smiled, kind of understanding what he meant. It seemed that Ron didn’t even know what he was doing though.

“It doesn’t matter,” Thia said hotly. “He shouldn’t have given you two detentions.”

“Just give them to him, Thia,” Harry said with a shrug. “Two detentions with Professor Snape have to be better than weeks with Umbridge.” Thia shrugged in resignation and turned to the class.

“Any other questions on this subject?”

“Do you know why he became a Death Eater and why he switched?” Hermione asked inquiringly. A quick shadow passed over Thia’s face, but it was soon gone.

“Even if I did, Miss Granger,” she told the girl sternly, “I would not tell you. That is rather personal information you ask and it’s not my place to tell you.” Hermione nodded, but Harry could tell she wasn’t happy with the answer. The bell rang, freeing the students. “Harry, could you please stay?” Harry nodded and waited for the class to empty out.

“You could have warned me about Bryant,” Harry accused her, but all Thia did was smile.

“He bruise you up nice and good?” she asked impishly.

“Yes, particularly because I was late,” Harry said rubbing his sore arms. He hurt all over and was glad he hadn’t had to duel with Neville. “So what did you find out?”

“Nothing,” she said. “But,” she continued quickly, “I knew how important this was to you, so I wrote to Remus and asked him to

come. He's waiting in his old classroom. You should head there now, if you have the journal."

"Aren't you coming?" Harry asked curiously.

Thia shook her head. "No, there are a few things that I need to do before supper." Harry couldn't help but think that she was lying.

"Hello, Harry," Remus said brightly. "Thia wrote me and said that you had something to ask me."

"Hey, Remus," Harry said, sitting in the chair next to Remus. He went on to explain what he wanted. Remus sat, staring into the blazing fire, and thought about it.

"I think I could find the notes we made for the Map," he said after a long pause. "I don't remember all the spells we used, but they'd be written in there. Do you want to do the spell work or do you want me to do it?" he asked Harry.

"Could I? I mean, would I be able to do the spells and understand the notes?" he clarified.

"I don't see why not," Remus answered reassuringly. "I'm sure you don't want an old codger like me reading the letter already in there." Harry blushed, but nodded. "I'll send it in the mail when I find it. If it's where I think it is, I'll have it to you by tomorrow."

"Thanks, Remus," Harry said with a grateful smile. "I was wondering if you... could..." Harry paused and felt his cheeks burn redder. He hated asking for help, for anything, but this in particular. "Could you help me with Ron?" he asked in one quick breath.

"What was that?" Remus asked, holding his hand up to his ear and feigning deafness. "I'm old, so you need to speak up."

"Just help me, Remus," Harry said angrily. Remus thought for a moment, weighing his options.

"I heard his yelling long before I arrived," he answered slowly. "I woke up Tonks and we headed downstairs. This is something the two of you need to figure out."

"I just can't think of a way to talk with him where he won't accuse me or try to hit me or me him," Harry admitted bashfully.

"I was in a position a lot like that with Thia and an unnamed boyfriend," Remus spoke quietly. "I didn't mean to blow up at them or doubt them, but I did."

"How'd you get over it?" Harry asked curiously.

"I didn't," Remus said with a shrug. Harry's building hope smashed into a billion pieces. "But I didn't like the guy to start with, so it's different. Ron likes you, he just doesn't trust you. There is a difference, though it's very faint."

Harry shook his head in confusion. "I just don't get that. I don't understand any of this. Both Ginny and I are sorry it happened, we didn't plan it, and it's not going to happen again."

"But he's thinking that if it happened once, it'll happen again," Remus argued logically. "You'll have to try to talk with him, and don't forget to keep your temper," Remus added. "You won't help the situation if you keep yelling at him. It's hard to yell at someone who's talking to you calmly. That's the only reason Sirius survived the time I walked in on them."

"Am I going to have to worry about brothers all my life?" Harry asked after a moment of horrified thought.

"Yes. Well, you won't after you marry the girl," Remus said with a smile. Harry felt his cheeks burn as he thought about the implications. "I've got to be going. See you around, Harry."

"Thanks for everything," Harry said, waving as Remus left the room. He stayed and thought about everything Remus had said. Maybe he'd go and try to talk to Ron once more.

Chapter Thirty: The Gift

Baby, there's something about you
That I can hold onto
I'm going to hold onto that.
Five for Fighting: Something About You

Harry watched eagerly for the owl from Remus the next morning, but it didn't come. He was sore from his morning lesson with Bryant and knew he'd just get more bruises that evening during Quidditch practice. He was, however, looking forward to his second lesson with Keene and his first lesson with Althea Cayrs right before lunch.

Hagrid was beaming when Harry arrived, without Hermione or Ron, for his Care of Magical Creatures class right after breakfast.

"I got a treat for yeh," Hagrid announced to the class. "I was 'oping ter get 'im fer the start o' term, but didn't. But 'e's 'ere now." Hagrid lead them around the grounds and away from the buildings. Harry took this direction as an ill omen and started to worry about what Hagrid had up his sleeves.

"What is that?" Malfoy asked when they first saw it.

"'E's an Occamy," Hagrid said proudly. Harry stared at the animal in question. It was about three feet long, had feathers, and a serpent-like body. He rather liked this creature and couldn't figure out what had Hagrid so excited. "'E'll grow ter be 'bout fifteen feet an' 'e'll be a good fighter."

"Aren't they dangerous?" Blaise asked carefully.

"Only if you provoke 'em," Hagrid answered. "Jus' stay back an' 'e'll do yeh no 'arm. For the class, draw 'im an' label 'is body parts." Harry sat away from everyone and started his diagram. Neville walked over and sat next to him.

"Er, Harry, I was wondering if I could ask you something?" he said after about five minutes. Harry looked up, feeling confused, and nodded. "I was wondering if you'd explain yourself?" Harry stared at

him, surprised, and a faint blush spread across Neville's face. "You don't have to, but Ron's been bad mouthing you and I don't believe most of it. That, and Ginny's a special girl; if you hurt her, I'll..."

"No, I didn't," Harry said interrupting him. "Look, Ginny and I just kind of lost control," Harry explained, but Neville interrupted him.

"I know that," he said exasperatedly. "And I know most of what Ron has been saying is false. I'm just trying to figure out why you're getting so angry with Ron." Harry thought about it and went back to his drawing. Neville continued to stare at Harry, making him feel uncomfortable.

"Look," Harry finally said, turning to Neville, "I've never thought about that, so just give me awhile to think it through." Neville nodded and let Harry think.

Why did he get mad? A lot of it was because Ron was implying things about Ginny that Harry didn't like, or because Ron was threatening her. But other than that? Did his subconscious find some grain of truth in the accusations? He hoped he'd respect Ginny's wishes, but would he? Could he?

He didn't know why he felt the need to protect her. It wasn't like he had been her best friend or her brother before they started dating. He didn't have a right to feel protective of her. He didn't have a right to feel possessive of her; she wasn't his. Or was she? Not in the sense that he owned her, but she meant everything to him. She had saved him...

The bell rang, distantly echoing back from the castle walls, and everyone started to gather up their stuff. Neville stood, brushing off grass and dirt. Harry stood and faced his friend. "I'll give you an answer later, I promise." Neville nodded and they headed back to the castle together. Harry said goodbye in the Entrance Hall and walked into the Great Hall for his lesson with Althea Cayrs.

"Hello, Harry," Althea said as Harry stepped into the vast room. She was leaning up against the end of the Hufflepuff table, but stood

straight as he approached. She was several inches shorter than Harry and was a rather plain looking person.

"Hello, Ms Cayrs," Harry responded in like. She smiled and her face lit-up with the warmth radiating from it.

"Call me Althea, I don't care," she said in a gentle tone. Harry nodded and stood in front of her. She was the type of person who made you feel comfortable, even though you've never met before. "So, you've never had healing lessons before, is that correct?"

"I've learnt really basic spells," Harry responded, looking down at the short witch.

"Like what?" she asked, looking for information.

"I can heal cuts and bruises, simple fractures in the larger bones, and sprains," Harry answered.

"Write down the healing spells you use for those and any you've heard of before that you want to learn." Harry took the proffered parchment and wrote them down. She looked at the page and a smile crept over her face. "I can tell an auror-trained healer taught you these. They're the basic healing spells."

"Yeah, Thia taught me them," he told her, and Althea nodded.

"Well, they work, but they waste a lot of energy," Althea said as she took out a book. She handed it to him and he paged through it. It was handwritten and described many different types of healing. "This will be your main textbook, but there will be one or two others that I'll get for you later, when we need them. This is my notebook, or rather a copy of it. You'll learn every spell in there, because they're the ones I deem most important. You said you have very little free time after school, correct?"

"Yeah, I've got a lot of things to do," Harry replied.

“Well, then, in a few weeks we’ll spend class time in the hospital wing so that you can learn how to heal on real people. But first,” she said taking out her wand, “we need to learn the spells.”

Harry spent the next two hours learning two healing spells. She went through the theory of the spell first and then showed him the wand movement. Next, she taught him how to pronounce it and then he was allowed to put everything together. He didn’t do as well as he had hoped, but healing was never his thing.

By the time the bell rang for lunch, Harry was exhausted. He had spent so much energy with that class that he was beyond surprised. He slumped into his chair and waited for Ginny to arrive so that they could eat together.

The day passed in a blur after that and it was to Harry’s surprise that he found himself in the Dark Arts room, training with Thia. They reviewed some of the things Harry had learnt right before break and then they sparred. Harry was taken aback by how long he could hold his own against her.

When they were done, Harry sat in his normal desk, sipping his cup of tea. Thia sat in the desk next to him, staring at him over her own cup. “Was Remus able to help?”

“Yeah, but he said he needed to find the notebook they made,” Harry answered. “Thanks for thinking of him. I can’t believe I didn’t.”

“It wasn’t a problem,” she said. “How do you like your classes?”

“They’re hard,” Harry answered honestly. “But I like them. They’re the challenges that I really need. Thanks for convincing them to help me.”

“That wasn’t a problem either,” Thia said smiling. “So what did you do with them?”

“Bryant beat the crap out of me both mornings so far. I think he enjoyed it,” Harry said absently, rubbing a bruised bruise. “I didn’t manage to cast two healing spells successfully for Althea and Keene has been testing me on all the spells I know.”

"That sounds about right," Thia said with a nod. "Don't let Bryant fool you, he's a teddy bear underneath all that gruffness."

"If you say so," Harry said, doubting her word.

"And healing is a lot harder than it looks, especially to do it the way she's teaching you. Just don't give up," Thia warned him. "Althea hates quitters."

"Okay," Harry said, "but there's no way I would quit. I do like Keene."

"Yeah, Keene's a good guy," Thia nodded in acknowledgement. "He'll make sure you know every spell you need to know." She paused. "Including Dark spells that you'd rather not know."

"Aren't you teaching me that?" Harry asked.

"I was," she clarified. "But he will now. It'll give us more time to work on Occlumency and dueling. He'll be teaching you spells, I'll show you how to apply them." Harry nodded in understanding.

"Well, I need to go finish my Potions homework," Harry said as he finished the last of his tea. "Don't need to give him a reason to give me another detention."

"Have you served them yet?" Thia asked.

"No, he hasn't told me when," Harry answered. "See you at supper." Thia nodded and Harry left to finish his homework.

"So do you have an answer yet?" Neville asked, once Harry had limped into the common room after that evening's Quidditch practice. Harry sat next to him and thought about what to say.

"For one, I don't like what Ron's implying about either of us, but particularly about Ginny," Harry answered. "She's his sister, but he spreads rumors about her that aren't true."

"He doesn't mean to," Neville answered honestly.

"I know, but he still does it. I also," Harry shook his head, not sure how to say it. "She's my girlfriend and I feel like I need to fight for her, to protect her."

"Ron wasn't threatening her," Neville argued logically.

"He did Saturday morning," Harry responded. "And then there's the fact that Ginny has helped keep me together since Sirius's death," Harry whispered quietly. "She's important to me and I'm not going to lose her without a fight."

"That's interesting," Neville said in a slow thoughtful voice.

"Why?" Harry asked warily.

"I thought that's what you said Sunday night, but I wasn't sure if you really meant it," Neville explained. "I think Ron needs to know just how much she means to you."

"I've told him that before," Harry said shortly. "And I thought he believed me."

"Well, tell him again," Neville advised. "We all know how thick Ron can be."

"Yeah," Harry mumbled. "What do Dean and Seamus think?"

"About the same as I do," Neville added with a shrug. "We know something happened, and that it wasn't great but it wasn't as bad as Ron makes it out to be. We aren't going to tell anyone, either."

"Thanks," Harry said with a smile.

"But if you continue to sleep down here, people will start to notice," he cautioned Harry. Harry nodded, but a thought came to him.

"Why do you care so much?" he asked Neville. "I'm mean about why I got mad at Ron and about Ginny?"

"You and Ron are good friends, for each other and to me," Neville answered with a shrug. "I don't want a girl to mess that up. And I don't want you to hurt Ginny in any way. She's always been nice to me and she's a great person."

Harry nodded in agreement and headed up the stairs to sleep. He needed a good night's sleep tonight, because he was starting to run on empty. Of course he didn't get the rest, but instead woke fitfully through out the night. Couldn't he just get one small break his way?

"Hey, Gin," Harry said, greeting her the next morning. He kissed her quickly on the cheek. "How are you?"

"I should be asking you that," she said with a smile. "I'm fine, thanks for asking. How are your new classes?"

"Good. I like them," Harry answered, piling food onto his plate. "Though Bryant's lessons just plain hurt."

"Oh, you poor baby," Ginny said, hugging him. They sat in silence, eating and thinking. "Have you talked to anyone?" Ginny finally asked.

"Yeah, Neville talked to me yesterday," Harry answered. "I think that's straightened out, except for Ron. Do you know why Hermione won't talk to me?"

"She isn't talking to you?" Ginny asked, looking surprised. "I didn't think she was mad enough to ignore you."

"Yeah, she's sitting with Parvati and Lavender in all the classes we have together," Harry informed her.

"I don't know." Ginny thought about it for a moment. "I'll ask her when I get the chance."

"Thanks," Harry said, looking up as the mail was delivered. Harry had always loved to watch the mad chaos as the owls descended to their targets, but today's glance was more than an idle one. He was thrilled when an owl landed in front of him with a medium sized package.

“What’s that?” Ginny asked, looking at it with curiosity.

“Nothing for you,” Harry teased her. “At least not yet.” She stuck her tongue out at him, but he just smiled. Putting the package into his pocket, he stood, deciding to get his book bag from his room. “See you at lunch, Gin.”

“See you, luv,” Ginny said grumpily. “That gift better be worth the wait,” she added with a smile and waved as he left. Harry rolled his eyes and hoped to himself that it was.

In his dorm room he unwrapped the notebook and read the small letter attached to it.

Dear Harry,

Sorry that it took an extra day, but it wasn’t where I thought it was. I’m glad I found it though.

As a Marauder I must ask you not to show this to anyone. The only reason I’m showing you is because you’re James’ son and he would have wanted you to see this. But, please keep this away from everyone else, including Thia, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Thank you, Remus

Harry grimaced. It would be hard keeping this a secret from everyone, but he’d try for Remus. He stuffed it into his book bag and climbed down the stairs for Transfiguration.

The day passed slowly for Harry, even his last class with Keene for the week, which he had after lunch. Hagrid showed them the Occamy and Hermione told everyone trivial facts about them. Finally, the bell rang and Harry all but sprinted to the Room of Requirement.

He sat on the edge of his cliff and opened the notebook. He read through the notes, writing down things that were important for his task. Harry was surprised to see how thorough the notes were and he knew he’d be able to follow the directions.

It was also fun to read. There weren't only notes about the making of the Map, but also notes about their lives. Sirius and James were continually teasing one another about everything and anything. Remus would step in every so often to correct grammar, straighten out the facts, or mercilessly tease them both. Even Wormtail snuck in a comment or two, but Harry thought he was just egging them on.

Harry stayed through supper, working on the Journal. He needed to come up with two passwords, one to open it and one to close it, but he couldn't think of anything that wasn't corny. 'Love forever.' Well that's a stupid password, Harry mocked himself. So is 'Unfinished Thoughts'. Finally, he gave up and picked two passwords from the horrible list he had gathered. He finished the spells and shut the book.

He picked it up and paged through the blank pages. He couldn't see either of the letters he and Ginny had written. He tapped his wand on the cover and muttered, "A few things easier to write." The first two pages were quickly covered in writing and their letters reappeared. "A few things easier to read," and the pages disappeared. Harry smiled; he had done it! Now he just had to explain it to Ginny.

It was finally Friday night, but Harry's week wasn't over yet. He still hadn't told Ginny about the Journal. Someone was always around to listen in. He hoped to tell her later that night and he hoped that Ron wouldn't find out. Things were bad enough as they were. First, though, there was the D.A. meeting; the first meeting of the new year.

He waited patiently as the students filed in and was surprised to see Ron enter the room. However, Ron went to the back of the room and turned away from Harry. They couldn't start because Thia hadn't arrived yet. Harry looked over his students and noticed a few odd looks on their faces. Some of them were staring at the split up trio with concerned, worried, and/or interested looks. Others were giving Harry and Ginny odd looks filled with speculation. A few others dared to give him doubtful looks.

Thia finally arrived, fifteen minutes late, and Harry glared at her. She shrugged and took her seat next to the fire. Harry turned back to the crowd and changed his plans for the twentieth time that night.

"Is there anything anyone wants to discuss?" he asked the group. There were a few surprised looks and an embarrassed silence fell over the group. "No?" Harry said, surprised. "Then let me ask you a question." There were a few laughs, but Harry didn't wait for them to finish. "Harry, why the hell did you defend Snape Monday in Defense Against the Dark Arts?"

Harry noticed he got everyone's undivided attention. "The simple answer is that I owe my life to that man. He saved me on the nineteenth and without his intervention I'd have died or ended up in the closed ward, insane." He looked over the group and saw the stunned looks on their faces.

"Another reason is that I have known that Snape has been a spy for awhile now." He heard Thia's intake of breath and he shot a look at her. "What does it matter? It's not like I can rise any higher on Voldemort's 'to do' list." Thia frowned, but nodded. "I found out by accident a few years ago and then through my connection with Voldemort this year. We've all had our doubts about him and now you know they were based on some fact."

"Why do you trust him?" Cho asked, astonishment coloring her voice.

"Because he can't serve Voldemort anymore; he doesn't have a choice," Harry told them. "Voldemort wants his death and it won't be a pretty one. Sure, the saving my life thing could have been staged, but not the events that have happened since."

"Like what?" Hannah Abbott asked.

"Our new Potions textbook for one obvious answer," Harry told her.

"But he wrote it," Hermione argued logically. "You've got to admit, someone who wrote a book about Voldemort's special poisons is questionable, especially when he came up with them."

"I've read through it all," Harry told them. Hermione gave him a startled glance. Obviously she was surprised that he had read ahead in a class, particularly Snape's. "Less than half of those potions are just his work and those that are his are kind of pathetic compared to

the others. Well, they are when you look at the amount of pain and suffering they cause, at least. He worked on the antidotes on just about every other potion in there and has notes on the few he hasn't figured out. Very little of that book is about the poisons; most of it is concerned with the antidotes."

"You said you were a special case," Blaise said insolently. "What did you mean?"

"That's between Professor Snape and me," Harry told them with authority.

"The group his dad was in didn't get along with Snape," Ron told the group. Harry glared at him, but Ron turned to look the other way.

"That's only the tip of the iceberg, Ron," Harry said waspishly. "And that's all that will be said on that matter."

"What about Rita's article?" a fifth year Hufflepuff named Carlos asked.

"What about it?" Harry asked right back. "Do you mean the barely hidden accusations or the blatant lies? I hope you all know me well enough to know where my loyalties lie. Don't insult me by believing her. If you want my advice, subscribe to the Quibbler."

"Why?" Carlos asked, surprised. "They only print rubbish."

"Luna's father," Harry stressed delicately, and Carlos blushed, "is the editor, and he is willing to print the truth. Don't let common misconceptions sway your beliefs."

"Why did you quit Charms and Herbology?" Susan Bones asked. There were several nods of agreement from his classmates, and students from other years looked on in interest.

"I'm taking other classes," Harry answered evasively, with a quick look at Thia. She shrugged slightly, barely moving her shoulders at all, and Harry took that as an approval.

“What classes?” Lavender asked, interested. “Can we join?”

“No, you can’t,” Harry answered quickly. “One is physical training, one is a class from a Spell Master, and the other is a healing course.”

“Why can’t we join?” Blaise asked suspiciously.

“Because, as far as I know, none of you are at the top of Voldemort’s to kill list,” Harry answered bitterly and harshly. He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, that was out of line.” Blaise nodded his acceptance. The others looked put out and worried by Harry’s answer. “Let’s just start with tonight’s lesson, all right?” Harry asked, effectively changing the subject. The meeting went smoothly after that, and Harry taught them a new shield he had read about in the book Remus had given him for Christmas.

He left after everyone had gone and went around the corner. He waited until he heard Ginny’s footsteps and surprised her by walking towards her.

“Why are we meeting in secret?” Ginny asked, her surprise evident in her voice.

“I don’t want a chaperone,” Harry answered honestly, “and I don’t want Ron angrier with me.” He walked in front of the Room of Requirement three times. He entered their hide-away and Ginny followed. “I have your gift.” Ginny sat eagerly under the tree and Harry took out the wrapped Journal.

She unwrapped it, and then immediately dropped it into her lap, slightly angry and very shocked. “Luv, this was for you,” she informed him gently, but Harry knew she was angry with him.

“Read the letter, Gin,” Harry instructed her. She picked up the letter and read it with growing interest. He had known that he would have botched up the explanation, so he had written it out.

She took out her wand and muttered quietly, “A few things easier to write.” She read through her own note and then read his letter. Her

face went through several emotions, but overall she was happy. When she was done, she set it down slowly and looked over at him.

“So was it worth the wait?” Harry asked nervously. She didn’t say anything, but leapt at him. She threw her arms around him and started to cry. “Why do I always make girls cry?” he asked her, quite startled.

“Because you’re so damn lovable and cute,” Ginny laughed through her tears. “I’m not sad, not really. Harry, I love the gift!” she said, pulling away far enough to see his face. “Thank you.”

Harry smiled down at her and hugged her tightly. “I’m glad you do.” He led her to the cliff and they sat side-by-side, looking out at the ocean. They sat like that, holding hands, for a long while.

“Are you really that worried about going too far?” Ginny asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes and no,” Harry answered. “I’m just not sure, that’s all. I think more boundaries will help.” She continued to look out at the horizon, but Harry turned toward her.

“Like what?” Ginny asked, a little confused and embarrassed.

“What about, shirts stay on,” Harry offered.

“Oh, but I like that view of you,” Ginny teased. He smiled, but a blush crept onto his cheeks. “I’m sorry, luv,” Ginny said, kissing his cheek softly. “Okay, hands off my breasts then,” she said very softly. Harry felt his cheeks blush a deep crimson red.

“All,” he started, but he had to clear his throat. “All right, sounds fair. What happened? I’m mean, how’d we lose control?” Ginny shook her head, just as confused. They sat in a slightly embarrassed silence for several more minutes. “I guess that’s good for now. What are you going to do about Ron?”

"I'm going to wait until I calm down and then I'm going to prank him," Ginny informed him. "Want to help?"

"Sounds like a plan," Harry replied. "Though you'll have to wait until Ron and I are friends again, 'cause I'm not playing a prank on him until then."

"Fair enough," Ginny answered. "I talked to Hermione yesterday..." She trailed off and Harry waited for her to continue.

"And?" Harry prompted her.

"And she's not exactly mad at you," Ginny replied. "She doesn't want to pick sides too much. She says you both made mistakes and you're too stubborn to admit it to each other. She says it's just like fourth year."

"I hated fourth year," Harry mumbled angrily. "I hope it doesn't take so long for Ron to talk with me normally. School sucks without them."

"Yeah," Ginny agreed. "Hermione isn't enjoying it at all. Ron hasn't talked with her once since she yelled at him on the train. And she's tried talking." A silence fell between them and they enjoyed the others company. After a few minutes of snogging, Harry pulled away to look at Ginny.

"We should head back before curfew, don't want to run into prefect Ron," Harry told her. Ginny nodded and they headed back to the common room together. They entered the room holding hands and Harry didn't realize that until it was too late.

Ron calmly walked over to them and barely managed to grind out, "Potter, come with me," before moving towards the dorms. Ginny frowned, but Harry gave her a reassuring smile.

He mouthed, "I'll be all right," and followed Ron up the stairs, pretending nothing was wrong. But everything was wrong, in Harry's opinion. He didn't like the way things were anymore.

They climbed the stairs slowly, side-by-side, as if they were the greatest of friends. Yet, Harry couldn't help but the look on Ron's face made him feel like he was walking to his execution.

Ron stepped forward and slowly opened the door for Harry. Harry cringed at the loudness of the squeak and entered. He turned to face Ron and blanched; he couldn't bear the look of anger, hate, and disappointment that covered Ron's face. The door gave one more squeak and slammed shut.

Harry completely forgot that he was destined to be killed by Voldemort and not the tall red head in front of him. Instead, he found himself hoping beyond hope that he'd live to see the door opened once again.

Chapter Thirty-One: Lightning

To be hurt
To feel lost
To be left out in the dark
To be kicked when you're down
To feel like you've been pushed around
To be on the edge of breaking down
And no one's there to save you
No, you don't know what it's like
Welcome to my life
Simple Plan: Welcome To My Life

Harry took a deep breath and promised himself that he wouldn't lose his temper. He just wished that Ron would follow the same rule. It didn't look like he'd have that luck today.

"I thought I told you not to date Ginny!" Ron bellowed at Harry.

"You never said that," Harry argued calmly.

"Don't play mind games, Potter!" Ron screamed, taking a step away from the door. "You do not have the permission to see my sister alone. In fact, I don't want you eating with her any longer!"

"That's not fair to me or Ginny," Harry said lightly. "And your mother said it was alright, so I'm going with her authority over yours."

"Don't play your games, Potter," Ron repeated loudly, spraying spit all over the place. "You have my mother wrapped around your finger, so of course she's going to agree with you."

"I never talked to her about this," Harry told him. "She talked to Gin and only Gin. Look, Ron, I'm sorry for—"

"Sorry's don't count!" Ron hollered, taking another step forward. "Sorry's wouldn't have undone anything, had you gone farther!"

"I'm sorry I betrayed your trust," Harry said loudly over Ron's continual muttering. "But, Ron, Gin's the only thing that has kept me

together. I can't get rid of her; I can't just let her walk away. Not now, and I don't think I'll ever be able to. Anyway, Ginny's a fifteen, almost sixteen-year-old woman, let her make her choices and face the consequences."

"Having her get pregnant?" Ron asked outraged. "I'm not going to let her face that consequence if I can help it!"

"She's not going to get pregnant, because I'm not going to have sex with her anytime soon," Harry told Ron truthfully. "Ron, I don't want Gin hurt either, but it'll hurt her if we break up and it'll hurt her if you don't accept us."

"What about if you get killed?" Ron asked spitefully. "What then, won't she hurt then?"

"Are you so positive that I'm going to die?" Harry retorted, feeling hurt. "Are you so sure that Voldemort will win? 'Cause if that's the case, life won't be worth living anyways. If I broke up with her tonight," Harry argued logically, "and I died a year or so later, don't you think Gin would still be hurt? And let's say she wasn't hurt by my death, would life be worth living anyways? Don't use that on me, Ron. It's not fair!"

"You're going to get her killed!" Ron yelled, almost pitifully, for a tear dripped down his cheek unbidden.

"Then let her be happy until she dies," Harry replied softly. "But I'm going to do everything in my power to keep her, you, Hermione, and everyone else alive. I'm not going to let Voldemort take you guys away from me without a serious fight."

"I don't care," Ron shouted, blinded by his anger. "I don't want you—"

"Hey, Harry," Neville said poking his head through the door, "can you help me with Potions? I don't understand it."

"He's busy," Ron snapped back at Neville.

"No, I'm done in here, Ron," Harry said calmly, walking past Ron. "I'll help you, Neville. What exactly do you need help with?" Harry felt

Ron's blazing glare follow him out the room and down the stairs and couldn't help but feel depressed. Things were really not right anymore.

That weekend was horrible. He didn't have Ron or Hermione next to him to pass the time with and he didn't dare do anything with Ginny, fearing Ron would blow another fuse. He didn't have a training session with Thia, Remus, and Tonks, and he didn't know why. He had received a note that said that the lesson was cancelled and that was it. But the weekend finally ended and the week began.

The week, though, passed even more slowly for Harry. Never before had his classes been so hard to pay attention in or so absolutely boring. Without Ron to laugh with and without Hermione to keep him on task, classes became a trial of concentration and torture.

His morning training with Bryant was improving somewhat, thankfully. He could run the distances Bryant asked without problems, but the fighting was as hard as ever. They had put aside the sword for the time being and were working on hand to hand fighting. Bryant had said that he had never met a student less trained in the art of fist fighting.

Lessons with Keene were a blast. Keene was teaching Harry a few cool spells and Harry couldn't wait for the time that the D.A. would be able to handle them. One spell was a simple enough charm that flipped your opponent's hair into his face. The only problem was aiming the spell well enough to hit their scalp. An ever cooler spell was a throwing spell that propelled the target six or more feet away. That one was Harry's favorite.

Althea's lessons weren't quite as exciting as Keene's or physically challenging as Bryant's, but they were hard and interesting in their own right. Althea had a way of showing you the importance of learning the little things behind the actual spell. Harry appreciated that, because he thought he might have stopped those lessons otherwise. He appreciated knowing why he was doing something a certain way and why he shouldn't do it another.

The week started on a bad note and ended on one. Snape had informed Harry Monday during class that his first detention would be

served that Friday after supper in the dungeons. Harry dragged his feet down the stairs and towards his least favorite classroom. Once at the door to Snape's office, Harry knocked and waited for a voice to call him in.

"You're late, Potter," Snape said waspishly from behind his desk.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Harry apologized sincerely. "The clock in the Gryffindor common room was set back ten minutes by some first years."

"That's a poor excuse," Snape informed him.

"It's not an excuse; it's the truth," Harry replied smoothly. Harry could have sworn that the corners of Snape's mouth turned upwards in a smile. "What would you like me to do, Professor?"

"I've noticed that you enjoy picking apart potions," Snape said, shuffling through a stack of parchment in the center of his desk. Harry was surprised that Snape had noticed. "I want you to take a look at this poison and map out how it works."

Harry took the offered parchment and sat down on the floor in a corner. He took a quill, ink, and parchment out of his bag and set to work. Snape sat at his desk correcting papers, but Harry ignored him. They worked like that in silence for almost twenty minutes, before Snape put the stopper on his red ink and stood. He walked over to where Harry sat and looked at his work.

"That's not quite right," Snape said pointing to some of Harry's work. "It's the secretion from lobalugs that cause the numbness. I wanted to ask you what you meant last Monday when we were talking about the skin eating poison."

"It was in one of the visions I had from Voldemort," Harry said evasively.

"The Dark Lord only has two uses for that poison," Snape informed Harry. "And the Order would have heard about the second use. Who did he initiate over Christmas break?"

Harry looked at the potions master with surprise. "I can't tell you that, Professor. I'm not telling anyone."

"May I ask questions about that person?" Snape asked delicately. Harry nodded. "Is his father a Death Eater?" Harry nodded. "Is he a Slytherin?" Harry nodded again. "Is he a leader in the house?" Harry nodded again. "Thank you for telling me, Mr. Potter." Harry nodded.

"Why do you need to know?" Harry asked. "You can't change the fact."

"I need to protect the students in my House," Snape answered. "And that includes keeping tabs on the Death Eater wanna-bies and those with the Mark. And one never knows if the person in question might change sides." Harry shrugged indifferently, thinking that Malfoy would never switch sides.

Harry went back to work, ignoring Snape. This wasn't so bad for a detention. Harry had enjoyed this part of the new Potions curriculum and he wasn't going to complain if this was all Snape had him do. Snape went back to his desk and took out another stack of papers and started to correct them. An hour passed and Harry started to wonder when Snape would let him out.

Finally, half an hour later, Snape told him to leave. Harry placed his work onto Snape's desk and left, glad to be free. He walked up the flights of stairs until he reached the Fat Lady.

"Christmas holidays rock," Harry told her tiredly and walked forward, right into her closed portrait.

"Careful there, dear," she told him.

"Why didn't you open?" Harry asked angrily.

"You didn't give the password," she told him, stating what she believed was the obvious.

“Wasn’t ‘Christmas holidays rock’ the password?” Harry asked, completely stunned.

“It was, dear, but isn’t any longer,” she told him.

“Can’t you let me in?” Harry asked her, just wanting to head to bed.

“I can’t unless you give me the password,” she told him.

“You know I’m a Gryffindor, though,” he argued.

“I can’t let you in without the password.”

“Fine, I’ll go find Professor McGonagall.” Harry turned and hurried to Professor McGonagall’s office several floors below. Lucky for Harry, she was still there.

“Mr. Potter,” she said, surprised, “it’s past curfew.” Harry looked at the clock and smiled weakly at her.

“You knew that I had detention with Professor Snape tonight, correct?” he asked her. She nodded and motioned for him to sit. “Well, he let me go but when I arrived at the Fat Lady’s portrait I couldn’t get in.”

“Did you give her the password?” McGonagall asked logically.

“Yes, but it was changed between the time I left for my detention and when I arrived back,” Harry told her. She looked at him, clearly showing her astonishment.

“The password wasn’t cleared through me,” she told the confused boy. “Since the mess we had with Sir Cadogan, I must clear all passwords before they’re put into use.” Harry nodded in understanding. “The only person who can retrieve a password is the Headmaster, so let’s hurry and ask him.”

They left her office and headed to Professor Dumbledore’s office a short way away. She uttered the password, moving the gargoyles,

and they climbed onto the moving spiral staircase. At the top, Professor McGonagall knocked and Dumbledore told them to enter.

McGonagall informed the Headmaster of the problem and he nodded in understanding. He took down one of his instruments and tuned it carefully. After he was done fiddling with it, he tapped it with his wand. In a high, squeaky voice it said, "Backstabber!" and then fell quiet.

Harry sighed and took a seat, running his fingers through his hair. Why couldn't Ron just let it go? Why did he have to keep rubbing it in his face?

"What's the matter?" McGonagall asked worriedly.

"Nothing," Harry muttered; he wasn't about to explain to these two people what happened.

"Is this Mr. Weasley's doing?" Professor Dumbledore asked in understanding.

"I believe so," Harry said tiredly.

"Is everything alright between the two of you?" McGonagall asked, concerned for both of her students involved.

"Oh, yes," Harry answered sarcastically. "Everything's just peachy." The two professors exchanged worried looks, but Harry had stood up to leave. "I need to go to bed. Goodnight, Professors."

"Goodnight, Mr. Potter," McGonagall called after him.

"Harry, how was your detention?" Dumbledore asked as Harry was reaching for the doorknob.

"It was rather pleasant," Harry answered, surprising both adults. "Professor Snape had me map out a poison for him and we talked about something."

"What?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

“Something I had said to get the detention,” Harry answered evasively. “Nothing important.”

“Oh, well then, goodnight, Harry,” Dumbledore said, dismissing him.

“Goodnight, Headmaster,” Harry offered and then finally headed to bed.

Harry climbed the stairs to his dorm room wearily fifteen minutes later. He stopped before his door and eased it open. The other boys were asleep and Harry was relieved that the door didn't wake them up. He paused to wonder why the door squeaked; usually the house elves took care of squeaky doors.

He changed into his pajamas, losing valuable sleeping time by confusing his shirt for his pajama trousers. He spent several minutes trying to force his legs through the armholes before he realized his mistake. He hastily fixed the problem and took off his glasses. He climbed into bed and under the warm comforter, pulling the bed curtains shut. He finally laid his head down and sat back up with a swallowed oath. He had hit his head against something hard.

He grabbed for his glasses and wand through the bed curtains and hurriedly lit the tip up. He looked at his pillow and saw the Journal sitting there. He smiled and picked it up. He tapped it with his wand and muttered, “A few things are easier to write.” He opened it up and found the letter Ginny had written.

Dear luv,

I can't believe you thought of this! It takes all my will power not to tell Hermione about it, because neither of us thought you or Ron were that thoughtful. Oh, that came out wrong, but too late now!

This week has been a bummer of a week. With Ron and Hermione out of sorts with you, life seems boring and lifeless. I never realized how much time I spent with you three and I know it must be harder on you. You look kind of lost without them, but not as bad as Ron does.

I wonder what's eating him. He shouldn't be so mad for just this. It doesn't make sense. Mum sent him a letter yelling at him. (Thankfully it wasn't a howler!) And you know what Ron did, he yelled at me for tattling. I didn't tell mum about him and I know Hermione didn't. I wonder if Thia or McGonagall told her.

I need to spend some time with you this next week. It isn't fair if Ron ruins our relationship because he's stubborn. I don't think I can spend another week like this one, so let's do something fun. I like the idea of flying on the Quidditch pitch, but it's your turn to treat me. Oh, wait! No, it's my turn. So that's what we'll do, but only if you want to.

Did you hear that Tonks and Remus had a huge row last week? I wrote a letter to the twins about Operation Wedding and they told me a little about it. I guess it was about the fight Thia and Remus had over Christmas break. I hope they don't break off the engagement because they are perfect for one another.

Talk to you about our date next Friday tomorrow sometime.

Until then,

Ginny

P.S. I just heard Ron's announcement for the new password. He supposedly changed it to "Backstabber" in honor of the Weird Sister's old hit by the same title. But Ron hates that song and strongly dislikes the Weird Sisters, so I don't think that's the true reason. I hope you didn't have difficulties getting in after your detention. Oh, and I hope that that went all right. GMW

Harry smiled weakly at Ginny's concern and cleared the pages. He'd wait to write her back until he had slept. He could barely keep his eyes open long enough to read the letter, let alone write another one.

Harry and Ginny watched the Ravenclaw vs. Slytherin game Saturday morning. They were both impressed with the team Sephra had put up for the Slytherins. The team was amazing and played well together and they didn't cheat. Harry started to worry about her team

when the game ended with Sephra catching the snitch. The score was 100-230 to the Slytherins.

He spent the afternoon with Ginny in the common room. They played a game of chess, but were just talking. Harry told her about his detention with Snape and his problem with the password. They walked down to the Great Hall and ate dinner next to each other. Towards the end, Professor McGonagall asked to speak with Ron privately and when they came back both looked cross.

The next afternoon, Harry made his way to the Dark Arts classroom for a training session with Thia, Remus, and Tonks. Harry was nervous about how this would turn out, because the twins reported that all three were angry at each other.

"Hello, Harry," Thia said happily. Harry could almost touch the awkwardness in the room; it was suffocating.

"Hey," Harry replied uncertainly. "What are we doing today?"

"We're going to duel," Remus answered, quickly getting to his feet. "En garde."

"No, Remus," Tonks interjected. "Thia was going to run Harry through an Occlumency drill."

"No, I wasn't," Thia snapped, "we were going to talk about the ways to incorporate healing into battle."

"How about," Harry said, stopping the developing fight, "we practice dueling when everyone's here to criticize me. We can practice Occlumency and talk about healing on Tuesday, Thia."

The three adults nodded and Harry started his duel with Remus. Remus was still heaps beyond Harry and way too fast for him, but Harry did better than he usually did against Remus.

The girls had a field day with the duel, but most of their comments were directed at Remus. Harry started to get annoyed and felt his temper start to boil over; he had been suppressing it for too long. The

comments turned bitter and Remus started to retaliate. It was only a matter of seconds until they were screaming at each other.

Harry stood and walked over to one of the bookshelves. He thought quickly and then sent a spell at it. The whole thing fell forward, surprising the three adults out of their argument.

"Thank you, for your attention," Harry said sharply. "I thought you were the adults and I was the kid, but I guess I'm wrong." They looked away embarrassed. "I don't know what's the matter, but I'm dealing with enough arguments, without you three adding more," he said loudly and bitterly. "Now, if you're not going to teach me, I'll leave and find a better use of my time."

"No, wait Harry," Thia said apologetically. "We'll stop." And stop they did, though the training wasn't nearly as fun nor as informative as the weekends normally were.

The next two weeks passed in similar fashion. Harry spent most of his time with Ginny, Hermione spent most of her time with Lavender and Parvati, and Ron spent his time alone and brooding. That was how the month of January passed: the golden trio not so golden any longer.

Harry was more or less miserable. His studies started to fail and fall by the wayside. He couldn't summon up enough energy to study for tests, finish simple homework assignments, or listen during class. His teachers were worried, new and old alike.

The only teacher that Harry wasn't disappointing was Bryant. Harry had thrown himself into those training sessions, learning how to fight by leaps and bounds. The physical energy he had to dispense in those classes allowed him to fall asleep at night. Even though, the rest wasn't void of the normal nightmares, he at least spent more time asleep than awake during the nights.

Ginny was worried for Harry. Her letters to him were filled with the same messages. "Don't get swept away!" "Just talk to him, he might listen now." "Hermione isn't mad, just say hi to her and she'll talk to you again." Harry didn't know what would have happened had he not

had Ginny, even if her concern was slightly annoying. He had never felt so lost before, not even after Sirius' death. At least he had Ron and Hermione at that time, but now he didn't even have them.

February dawned cold and viciously windy. The Quidditch team was practicing three times a week: twice after school and once on Saturday. They had their second game in three weeks and Katie and Harry were determined to win it. Hufflepuff had a good team, but they shouldn't have a problem with them. Well, they shouldn't, but the team was in turmoil. The keeper was livid with the captains. He was obviously angry with Harry, but was furious with Katie for standing up for Harry. Ginny was angry at Ron's near-sightedness and the rest of the team was shaken by the end of the golden trio.

Yes, the end. Harry had resigned himself, weakly and guiltily, to the end of the greatest friendship he had ever had. He couldn't get Ron to talk to him since a fight they had had at Quidditch practice the week before. Hermione wouldn't sit with either of the boys and Harry knew that Ron and Hermione had called it quits with their relationship. It was over. The best five years of his life and they were gone forever, a wished for dream that would never come again. Harry, though, couldn't help but wish for it.

It was Friday night, right after the week's D.A. lesson. Ginny was helping him clean up the scattered cushions, but Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. Harry glanced at her, surprised; he had thought she had left.

"I need to speak with you, Mr. Potter," she said looking at Ginny significantly. Ginny nodded in understanding and left the room; Harry hoped she hadn't gone far, because he needed to ask her out for Valentine's Day.

"What would you like, Professor?" Harry asked politely, sitting down in a chair that had appeared with a simple thought.

"We need to discuss your failing grades," she said tiredly. "It has come to my attention that you are barely passing most of your classes, if not all of them. You are slipping, Mr. Potter, and I will not allow you to." Harry looked at her, surprised. "You're a bright boy and

shouldn't be getting the grades you are receiving. If your grades don't improve in the next two weeks I'll have no choice but to remove you from the Quidditch team and take away your captaincy."

Harry gaped at her in horror. "You can't do that!" he sputtered vainly.

"And why not, Mr. Potter?" she asked with a raised eyebrow and thin lips.

"Because there's a game the next day!" he responded angrily. "You can't kick me off the team on the evening before a Quidditch game."

"I can and I will," she replied with authority, "unless you bring your grades back up to your normal level. Also, I should inform you that Althea and Druce are very disappointed in your drop in quality." Harry hung his head down, thinking for the first time in weeks about his grades and lack of attention in class.

"All right, Professor," Harry said quietly, "I'll bring them back up. Or at least try to."

"Harry, is everything alright?" she asked kindly. Harry looked at her and nodded, even though his eyes were screaming no. "I want you to come to me if you have any problems, do you understand?" Harry nodded once again and she smiled, though it was a small one. "Goodnight, Mr. Potter."

"Goodnight, Professor." She left and Ginny re-entered, the questions forming on her lips already. "She wanted to talk about my grades," Harry informed her before the questions could be let loose. He thought about their hiding place and the cliffs appeared. As they sat under the old oak tree, Harry told her about the short conversation.

"She's right you know," Ginny said softly into his shoulder where her head was resting.

"I know," Harry responded tiredly. "I just don't care anymore. It doesn't seem worth it without Ron and Hermione."

“Harry James Potter,” Ginny cried angrily getting to her feet. “How dare you think it doesn’t matter? It does! They still care for you. You just need to talk to Hermione and she’ll forgive you. She’s mad at you now for ignoring her this whole month. And Ron, well, he’ll be harder, but he doesn’t hate you.”

“I don’t know Gin,” Harry responded doubtfully.

“Well, I do know, luv,” she said with a smile that was contagious. Harry stood and wrapped his arms around her.

“Thanks, Gin,” he whispered into the top of her head. “Thank you so much.” All of a sudden music filled the air and Ginny started to sway to the beat of her favorite slow song. Harry danced with her and they spent several repeats of the song like that. When he finally pulled away, he looked deep in her eyes. She was a keeper for sure. “Hey, Gin,” he said instead, “do you want to do something on Valentine’s Day? It’s a Hogsmeade trip and I’d love to take you on a date.”

She smiled and nodded. They walked out of the room, Harry glancing back at the ocean, calm and serene.

“Why are you doing this to my family?” a black man yelled. Harry glanced at the room casually, taking in all the details. There were two disheveled bodies of young girls lying on the floor several feet away. Next to the man lay a woman, scared, scarred, and bleeding from several hours of torture she’d been put through. On the other side of the very muggle room lay the unconscious bodies of several young boys.

Voldemort just laughed in response to the question and turned to face his Death Eaters. “Continue as you were,” he said to the happily sadistic men and women in the black robes.

Voldemort left with a “pop” and Harry went along with him. They were now standing in a magical family’s house. Harry had only a moment to take in the open copy of Lockhart’s magical pest removal book when he heard the screams of a witch. Voldemort strode through the opened doors into a connecting room and laughed when he saw the sight. Harry felt his scar burn with the pain.

His laughter caused a halt in the torturing and the Death Eaters turned to bow to their master. Voldemort looked over their handiwork and Harry felt his stomach heave. A woman of Asian decent was lying on the floor covered in her own puke and blood.

"Why?" she sobbed at the horror that stood before her. "Why?" Voldemort just laughed and motioned for them to continue. A Death Eater stepped forward and forced a potion down her throat. It caused her to puke, but all that came out was blood and tissue from her stomach. Voldemort disappeared with another "pop" and reappeared in a room decorated with family portraits.

On the floor lay a man clutching the dead body of his wife. Both were bleeding, their blood mingling on the floor below them, staining the white carpet. The man had little skin on his arms and legs; Harry recognized it as the effect of the skin-eating poison. The woman was missing large chunks also, but she had already been delivered from the pain and suffering.

"What have we done to deserve this?" the man cried from the floor. "We have been faithful to you, my Lord."

"You may have, but your son hasn't," Voldemort replied with dark humor. "Continue."

He left once more and reappeared in the front yard of a farmhouse. Outside laid the writhing forms of a woman and her three children. They were obviously muggle and Harry could tell that they were under the Cruciatus Curse. Voldemort strode forward and watched with sadistic enjoyment. Finally the witch that was causing the pain lifted the curse and bowed low to her master.

"Very good, Bella," he congratulated her. "Now for the finishing touches." Bella took out a knife and walked over to the twitching bodies of the small family. She bent down to the youngest one and grabbed his small head. She carved something carefully into his forehead, but Harry couldn't tell what it was. She rose and repeated the process.

“Why—are you—doing this to—my family?” the woman gasped out through the pain.

Voldemort circled to face the woman. “Because your son has allied himself with my enemy.” Harry screamed and felt his scar erupt in pain. On each of their foreheads was etched a jagged shape he recognized as a lightning bolt. Voldemort visited each of the houses and the ceremony was repeated. Each body, whether dead or alive, now bore a mark Harry had learnt to loathe, a lightning bolt scar.

And throughout the whole ordeal, Harry never once stopped screaming in fear, anger, grief, guilt, and, of course, from the pain. His life was just not right.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Can Death Heal

Hush my love,
Now don't you cry
Everything will be alright.
Close your eyes and drift in dream.
Rest in peaceful sleep
Creed: Lullaby

Harry's screams woke Ron, who climbed out of his bed angrily. He'd show that over-stuffed egotistical boy exactly what he thought of Harry waking everyone up.

Ron walked over to Harry's bed and pulled back the curtains furiously, drawing in a deep breath. Instead of screaming at the frustrating boy, Ron let out a loud oath. Harry was pale white and his scar shone a deep red color. It took Ron a few moments to realize that it was bleeding. Dean, Seamus, and Neville walked over and all three cursed as well. Dean left to get Professor McGonagall and the other two tried to wake Harry up. Ron just stood in confusion and fear.

The last time he had seen Harry this pale was the start of Christmas break when he had been lying in the hospital bed, fighting for life. Ron had felt his heart twist in agony at the thought of losing Harry and he had been relieved to learn about his complete recovery.

The other time he had seen Harry pale (though not quite as pale) was when all the brothers had shown up that fateful Saturday morning. It hadn't lasted long, because Harry wasn't one to back down. Instead a faint blush of anger and embarrassment had covered the pale face, but Ron wouldn't forget that quick moment.

Neville turned and looked at the frozen boy. "Ron, help us wake him!" he shouted and Ron moved to help. Dean had left the doors open and boys were starting to crowd around, Harry's screams waking them as well. A grapevine of sorts was created and those who could see were telling those that couldn't what was happening.

Professor McGonagall shouted for everyone to get out of her way and then she entered the room. She took one quick glance at the room's

pale occupants and then went to the even paler boy. Only five short minutes had passed. They were the longest in Ron's entire life. Even longer than the minutes he had watched his sister disrobe his best friend... no his ex-best friend and then his ex-best friend start to disrobe his little sister.

She tried to wake him, but he wouldn't, or couldn't. It was hard to tell which. Professor McGonagall sent Seamus off to Madam Pomfrey and Neville off to Professor Dumbledore's. Both were to return with their adult as soon as possible.

Ron heard the loud voices of girls at the bottom of the stairs, trying to find out what was happening. They quieted as Neville reported to them in his deep, loud voice, and then Ron heard two screams he recognized: Hermione's and Ginny's. There was a loud commotion at the bottom of the stairs, but that was it. Soon the sobs of the two girls reached Ron's ears and he cursed Harry for doing this to them.

Almost ten minutes later, Neville returned with Dumbledore in his wake. A minute or two after that, Seamus entered with Madame Pomfrey. All three adults had a quick and quiet conversation and then the newcomers went to look at the boy on the bed.

Ron felt his stomach heave as he saw the state his best friend... no ex-best friend was in. His scar was bleeding freely now and his screams had become hoarse and scratchy. He only stopped screaming to take in raspy breaths of air with which to scream with some more. His body was shaking with the effort and lack of oxygen. Harry was a right mess and he hadn't even left his bed.

"Get Ginny," Dumbledore said after five minutes of futile shaking and investigation. "And Hermione." His voice sounded worried and tired. Ron started to fear once more for his ex-friend's life. He pushed his way through the crowded stairs and finally made it into the common room. He saw his sister and ex-girlfriend holding on to each other, desperately hoping for the best.

"Professor Dumbledore wants the two of you to come upstairs," he told them tiredly once he reached them. Hermione launched herself at him and he held her close. He was glad to have her in his arms

once again. Ginny, on the other hand, propelled herself up the stairs, pushing people aside. Ron, with Hermione in the crook of his arm, followed in her wake.

"Call him back, Ginny," Dumbledore was saying as the two entered. Ginny walked over to the bed and then glanced at everyone shyly. Her eyes caught Ron's and he was frightened by what he saw. She looked back at Harry and Ron felt his heart break. He had lost his little sister forever.

"Call him back, Ginny," Dumbledore finished simply. Ginny walked over to Harry, feeling her heart tear apart; he looked so horrible. She wanted to crawl in with him, but with everyone there she was too shy to do so. She glanced at everyone, catching Ron's watching eyes. She looked back and decided to do what she felt was right, her eyes filled with resolve.

She walked the remaining few feet and brushed his bangs out of his eyes. "Hush, luv." The door snapped closed and she looked up startled. Ron had shut the door and nodded for her to continue. She sat on his bed, next to Harry and cooed gently, "Hush, luv, don't scream." Harry stopped screaming, but it was only to take in more air. He started again and Ginny felt so lost.

He convulsed in pain, and Ginny threw herself on him so that he wouldn't hurt himself. He soon stopped, but his screams continued. Ginny snuggled into his chest and started to hum absently, running her fingers through his hair. She started singing the next stanza in her quiet soprano voice.

"You're safe while you're asleep in my arms,
Two arms holding you tight,
Makes everything right.
I'll hold you again but until then,
Just sleep my luv...I am here beside you.
I am here beside you."

There was a slight change in Harry's mood, yet he continued screaming, though they weren't as desperate. Ginny stopped singing at the end of that verse and looked at Harry sadly. "Come on, luv,"

she said encouragingly. "It's time to stop screaming." She started the next verse and Ron hummed quietly along with her.

"Just sleep my luv, I'm here beside you,
You're safe while you're asleep in my arms.
And if someday it seems,
You'll run out of dreams,
We'll hide one away just for the day.
So sleep my luv... I am here beside you.
I am here beside you."

The screams quieted and Ginny smiled at the sleeping boy. "That's it, luv," she whispered. "Come back to us." She started over, singing the verse that she had only hummed before.

"Sleep my luv, I'm here beside you,
You're safe while you're asleep in my arms.
The world is somewhere behind,
Don't worry your mind,
Wondering who cares about you.
So sleep my luv... I am here beside you.
I am here beside you."

Harry's screams started to become fitful, lasting only short periods of time, with deep breaths in between. He was calming down and Ginny repeated the lullaby over and over, until he stopped screaming altogether. She whispered in Harry's ear, "I love you, Harry James Potter." She was positive that he heard her and that he was the only one that did.

Ginny continued to stroke his hair, remembering what he had told her about that once. He enjoyed it when she did that and it was very calming. His breathing became even and he slipped into true sleep. Ginny didn't move and didn't stop combing his hair.

Ron watched silently as Ginny coaxed Harry into a deep slumber. He expected Ginny to crawl out of Harry's bed, but she stayed where she was, calmly stroking his hair. Ron moved forward, but Hermione held him back. He looked at her, confused, but she shook her head no.

The two Professors were having a hurried conversation with Madam Pomfrey. Ron heard her whisper, "He can't stay here."

"And yet, he can't be moved either, Poppy," Dumbledore replied. Hermione dragged Ron out of the room. She started to disperse the crowd, telling them that everything was all right. They left for their beds, many quietly complaining about the disturbance.

They headed back to the room and found it just as it was when they had left. Ron led Hermione to his bed and they sat on it side by side. Ron tried not looking at Ginny curled up next to Harry, but he found that almost impossible.

Just as everyone started to relax, Harry sat straight up in his bed, accidentally knocking Ginny off the bed. He stared around the room wildly and then he laid back down, already asleep. Ginny curled up next to him, murmuring something in his ear.

The talking adults were visibly divided on whatever topic they were discussing. Ron had never seen a teacher or staff member stand up to Dumbledore's wishes like this before. McGonagall was split between Madam Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore.

Neville, Seamus, and Dean were sitting on their respective beds and Ron saw them fight to keep their eyes open. Even if they wanted to they wouldn't have been able to sleep with the arguing adults. They kept glancing from Ron to Harry and Ginny, obviously worried about his reaction.

He wasn't sure how he'd take this in the morning. He was glad he had Hermione back. Nonetheless, he knew that if he said one cross word about this, she'd leave him again. He could also see the amount of love Ginny had for Harry; he'd never be able to separate her from him. But did he want to anymore?

Ginny sat up, looking at Harry worriedly. "He's ice cold," she whispered to the room in horror. Madame Pomfrey hurried over, giving Professor Dumbledore one last angry glance. She felt Harry's temperature and then conjured a stretcher. Just as she was getting ready to move him, Harry woke up, staring at her blearily.

"Wha're you doing in 'ere?" he asked stupidly. Ron watched his gaze traveled from Ginny sitting next to him to the other two Professors to his worried dorm mates and then finally to himself sitting with Hermione tucked into his arms. "What'd I do now?" he asked exasperated with himself. This question took everyone off guard; Harry just rolled his eyes at them all. "They were just the normal run of the mill nightmares, so you can all go back to bed."

Ron saw the worried look exchanged between Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall. Madame Pomfrey was watching Harry, deep in thought, until she asked suddenly, "Do you always get so cold when you dream?"

"Sometimes," he answered with a shrug. "What does it matter?"

"It's not good for your body to drop in temperature so quickly," she answered clinically. Harry shifted uncomfortably and Ginny looked at him, only able to feel concerned for him.

"That was no normal nightmare, luv," she chided him, giving his arm an encouraging squeeze. Ron expected Harry to explode, but, of course, he didn't.

"It was too, Gin," he told her softly. "It was just the normal dream about Cedric." Ron watched a cloud pass over Ginny's face, but it passed within the same second.

"What about the one before that?" she asked. Ron realized what Ginny had already figured out: Harry had blocked the memory of the first dream out. She was questioning him about the others to trigger the memory.

Harry thought for a second and then shook his head as if to shake cobwebs off it. "It was the dream I'm not talking about," Harry answered. "You know, the one bothering me at the end of break." Ron wondered what the dream was. By the look of Harry it was horrible, even by his standards and by the look on Ginny's face it was a normal one.

“And before that, luv?” Ginny prodded once more, smiling at him warmly. Harry screwed his face into a look of complete concentration. Ron waited with everyone else, hoping that he would remember.

“I don’t—” Harry started, but stopped thinking once more. He shook his head in defeat. “I don’t remember, Gin. Why?” he asked curiously.

“Because you wouldn’t wake up when shaken, you were screaming like a banshee, and your scar burst again,” she answered him honestly. Harry unconsciously lifted his hand to touch the scabbed over scar, running his fingers along the length. Realization bloomed on his face and he turned ghostly white. Ginny moved out of the way just in time, for Harry leaned over and puked several times. Madame Pomfrey hurriedly cleaned up the mess and Ginny got him a glass of water.

He smiled his thanks, but said forlornly, “I don’t want to talk about it tonight,” Harry answered. “Maybe in the morning.”

Ginny wrapped her arms around him, sensing his need to be held. “And why not, luv?” she asked cautiously.

“Because I don’t feel like it tonight,” he answered wearily and crossly. “Anyways, it’ll make the papers tomorrow for sure.” Ginny traded ominous glances with Hermione. “I’d like to get a few more hours of sleep, so if you’ll excuse me?” he added in a clear dismissal.

“Harry,” Professor Dumbledore said stepping forward, “will you be so kind as to tell me?” Harry wearily glanced at the Headmaster, but shook his head no.

“How about first thing in the morning?” he asked instead. “I can’t give you any locations or identities, so it’s nothing you can’t find out about.” Dumbledore nodded and left, sweeping McGonagall and Pomfrey out before him.

Ron watched sullenly as Ginny gave Harry a goodnight kiss. Hermione gave him a thankful peck on the cheek and the two girls left, whispering quietly together. He watched as Harry took off his glasses

and laid down to sleep. Ron had a lot to think about, but not until he got a chance to question Harry.

“Hey, Harry, what was that?”

Two hours later and still an hour before dawn, Harry made his way down to the common room fire. He took his favorite seat in front of the fire and sighed. It had been a long two hours. For a little while, his dorm mates (including Ron, who hadn't spoken to Harry for ages) tried to get more information from him. After he blew up at them, they left him alone, drifting off to sleep.

What was Voldemort up to? Who were those people that he killed and then mutilated? He sure didn't know them. And what was the point of adding the lightning bolt to their foreheads?

It was obviously some kind of message, but what did it mean? Was it some kind of challenge from Voldemort? Or was Voldemort trying to make it look like Harry had switched sides? But what would that accomplish?

Harry sat, staring at the glowing embers, thinking of nothing. An hour or so later the portrait swung open and Harry turned to see who had entered. It was Professor Dumbledore and Harry automatically got up. He followed the old man out and down to his office.

Once they arrived, Dumbledore handed Harry a cup of tea, which he accepted gratefully. They sat in silence and Fawkes glided smoothly to sit on Harry's lap. The bird started singing his beautiful song and Harry stocked him gratefully. Harry loved the sound of the phoenix song; it was so peaceful and calming, heartening and courageous. It helped heal the wounds the past night had caused.

“I have a rough idea of what happened last night,” Dumbledore started once the last note faded into nothing. “But could you tell me the little you do know?”

Harry told him about the black family that had been killed. (The man was dead by the time Voldemort had the Death Eaters mark him.) He then talked about the Asian woman and then the faithful Death Eaters

who were also killed. He ended with the Muggle family who had all died. He tried to explain about the scar, but he couldn't get the words to form in his throat.

"Could you please tell me about the lightning bolts?" Dumbledore asked calmly. Harry explained about them, telling Dumbledore everything Voldemort had said. Finally, he was done and he slumped tiredly into his chair.

"May I go, sir?" Harry asked after a short pause.

Dumbledore opened his mouth to say something, but closed it with a shake of his head. He thought for a long moment and then nodded. "Yes, you may go." Harry got up from the chair and headed down the many stairs to breakfast.

Hermione and Ginny moved over so that Harry could sit in between them. He grabbed a piece of toast and forced himself to eat it. That was all he would eat that morning, for at that moment the post arrived.

Hermione was only one of a handful of D.A. members who still bought the Daily Prophet. She said that it was important to know what the enemy was saying so that you could fight back when needed. She handed the owl a few Knuts and then unfolded the paper. She looked at the front page and gasped in horror. Harry caught sight of the largest picture and blanched.

On the front page was a picture of the dead couple who had said that they were faithful to the Dark Lord. Their sightless eyes were full of confusion and accusation, asking for answers. And on their foreheads were the lightning bolt cuts, prominently displayed.

Four Families Destroyed:
Is Potter behind this?
By Rita Skeeter

Last night a horror of a magnitude that hasn't been seen since the downfall of the Dark Lord occurred. Last night, according to the earliest reports, the Dark Lord's Death Eaters attacked

and killed four families simultaneously. Two of the families were muggles, the other two were purebloods, and one of those families were even Death Eaters themselves. (see picture)

The thing most disturbingly chilling is the only similarity between these mass killings. All of the victims, young and old, dead and alive, were marked with a lightning bolt on their forehead. As you should know Harry Potter, currently a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is marked in the same way and in the exact spot.

Some may call this coincidence, but I beg to differ. The Dark Lord had a purpose for adding those marks and this reporter wants to know why! Is Potter in league with the Dark Lord? Is Potter the Dark Lord's second in command? Or is Potter working on his own, with his own followers, trying to overthrow, not only the Dark Lord, but also the whole English Ministry?

The Minister was not able to comment, but Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt gave this quote, "All of the signs point to V-----; there is no evidence against it, but all for it." He was one of the first Aurors on the site of....

Harry stopped reading, because several things distracted him. First, was a loud wail from the Ravenclaw table and Harry realized that it was Cho Chang. Dean Thomas was staring at a black owl and the letter it bore as if it was about to erupt in flames. At the Hufflepuff table, a few seats away from Harry, sat a wide-eyed Justin Flinch-Fletcher.

But the thing that distracted Harry the most came from the Slytherin table. "That bastard," Blaise Zabini screamed at an unfolded copy of the Daily Prophet. "They were idiots, but at least they served him faithfully!" he yelled at the girl at his side. He picked up the paper and balled it up. He threw it at Malfoy. "You see what Voldemort does to

his followers! He uses them and then disposes of them. My parents served him faithfully and have since they were at Hogwarts... You know what he does?" Malfoy looked at the enraged boy in fear. "He kills them, treating them like traitors! And you want to know why?" Draco shook his head no, but Blaise continued anyway. "Because I didn't!"

Harry watched the boy storm out of the Great Hall and he remembered what Voldemort had said to that couple. It was because Blaise had chosen to fight along side him that Voldemort had killed Blaise's parents. It wasn't fair.

Other things started to click in Harry's mind. All four students affected had a black owl. Harry knew, as did the whole school, that a black owl meant a death had occurred in the family at the hands of Voldemort and his Death Eaters. The black family must have been Dean's family. The Asian woman had to be Cho's aunt, who had raised her. The Death Eaters were obviously Blaise's parents. And the Muggle family was Justin's. All were members of the D.A., and that was the only connection they all shared concerning the fight against Voldemort.

Harry looked up at Dumbledore and saw the dulled eyes staring at the hurting students. There was no twinkle; there couldn't be. A horror had occurred last night and Harry had witnessed the deaths of four families of his good friends. Each student was a strong supporter of him. Cho, Blaise, and Justin were leaders in their houses and in the D.A. Dean was his roommate and an even better friend than the other three.

All this death and its only purpose was to send a message to Harry. Well, Harry now understood and he wouldn't let Voldemort get away with this. Someday he would make Voldemort pay for hurting his friends. Harry got up angrily and stormed out of the Great Hall. He needed to go think about this.

"Harry?" he heard Ginny's cautious voice call to him. He didn't acknowledge her, but instead he continued looking out at the stormy sea. He heard her soft steps approach him and then felt her sit next

to him. He turned away, not wishing her to see his face. "What's the matter, luv?" she asked, hugging him.

Harry leaned into the embrace, thankful for the support, but he didn't cry. He was too angry to cry, too tired to cry, and too fed up with crying to cry. Ginny held him tight and whispered comforting words into his ear. Harry couldn't understand most of what she said, but he got the meaning. His body relaxed and he was able to let go of the anger.

"What's the matter, luv?" she asked once more, whispering into his ear. Harry pulled away and then jumped casually over the edge. He landed softly and looked back at Ginny, who jumped also. He walked with her, down to the waterline and there they sat, with the ebbing tide at their feet.

"You want to know why he did that?" Harry asked rhetorically. "Because their children support me and are in the D.A." Harry gripped a handful of sand tightly, imagining that Voldemort was each and every bit of sand.

"You don't know that, luv," she stated.

"That's what he told Blaise's parents when they asked," he told her dully. "They were killed because he betrayed Voldemort and 'works' for me."

"Oh, luv," she answered, pulling him in for another embrace. "It's not your fault."

"And why not?" Harry asked, pulling away. "If Blaise hadn't promised his loyalty to me, his parents would be alive! If Dean weren't a roommate and friend," Harry yelled at her and the world, standing up and pacing frantically, "his family would be alive. If Cho weren't my friend and my strongest supporter in Ravenclaw, she wouldn't be hurting right now. If Justin weren't a good friend and a leader in his House, his sisters, brother, and mum would still be alive! It's because they are all close to me that this happened. If they hadn't chosen to be my friend, Voldemort wouldn't have killed their families!"

Ginny sat and looked at him, waiting patiently for him to calm down. He appreciated it and finally sat back down. "You know, that isn't a very fair thing to say," she told him seriously. "What else do you expect them to do, support you half-heartedly? Not to be your friend? Harry, there's no way for them not to fight. This generation wants to fight, needs to fight and we're responding. All Voldemort accomplished last night was angering those who already strive against him. Don't ever insult them like that again. As if they couldn't be your friend!"

Harry looked at her with surprise. He hadn't thought about that. Even without him, these four would still fight against Voldemort. They would have been targets, but still he felt horrible.

"I guess so, but—" Harry shook his head and turned back to the ocean. Ginny waited as patiently as she could, but that didn't last long.

"What is it? she asked him softly.

"I watched their families die," he said in desperation. "I watched them die, Gin, and I can't face them. Not now, not ever. Not knowing that their families' deaths were just to send a point to me. How am I going to face them?"

Ginny pulled Harry close and hummed a lullaby under her breath. Harry felt his body relax again, and he thanked the heavens above for this wonderful girl. "You'll face them just like you face Sephra," she told him confidently.

"Do you know how hard that is?" he asked forlornly. "I have to remind myself that they died fighting for something they believed in, but this time.... None of these people chose to fight against Voldemort. In fact, two were fighting for Voldemort." He stopped and turned away from her. He looked back at her, and his eyes were filled with such desperation that it broke her heart. When he started back up, Ginny felt her heart break once again. "Gin, I don't want to know this stuff. I don't want to know how the Death Eaters operate or how the command system works under Voldemort, but I do. I just want to have normal dreams about my girlfriend and school and Quidditch and I don't know... the future. Not nightmares from the past and

present. I just want to be free of that.” Harry heard Ginny strangle a cry and he instantly felt sorry for telling her all of this.

“I’m sorry, Gin,” he apologized into her hair. “I didn’t mean to burden this all on you.”

“Harry Potter,” she said angrily through her tears. “That’s what I’m here for. Don’t you ever forget that!” Harry smiled at her and wiped the tears from her face.

“I’ll try not to,” he answered honestly.

“You’d better not!” she threatened again.

“Let’s go back up,” Harry finally said. They walked up the steep pathway and after five or so minutes they came to the top. Harry was surprised to see Ron sitting under the tree with Hermione in his arms. Ginny steered him over to them and they sat across from Ron and Hermione.

“Hey, Ron,” Harry said awkwardly.

“Hello, Harry,” Ron said just as stiffly.

“Don’t make me hex you both!” Hermione threatened. Ginny laughed at the identical looks of horror on both boys’ faces. “That’s much better.”

“I’m sorry, Ron,” Harry offered once more, hoping that Ron would accept it this time.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, luv,” Ginny chided gently.

“Yeah I do, Gin,” he told her honestly. “I let your brothers down. I told them that there would be nothing inappropriate and that definitely wasn’t appropriate. Anyways, I owe him one for all the fights we’ve had since and things I’ve said to him.”

Ron looked at Harry, obviously deep in thought. He switched his gaze to Ginny and then to Hermione. Finally his gaze landed on Harry and

Ginny's entwined hands. "Apology accepted." Ron glanced around at the scenery and seemed to be struggling with something. "I'm sorry for blowing this way out of proportion."

Harry sat, a comically stunned expression on his face, matching the ones Hermione and Ginny were wearing. Ginny was actually staring at Ron with her mouth open, which amused Harry greatly. He gently closed it and then smiled at Ron. "It'd be my pleasure to forgive you." Ron smiled back; both men were thankful that this was over with. "Can I take your sister out for Valentine's Day?" Ron nodded and Hermione laughed happily. "That's good, 'cause I was going to take her out anyway." Ron smiled at Harry's comment and they started to joke around.

The tension between the four dissipated and Harry thought that the world was finally right. His girlfriend was at his side. His tutor was back now. An insane murderer was out for his blood. And best of all, his best friend wasn't competing for his blood as well.

Chapter Thirty-Three: Plain and Simple

I am no superman,
I have no answers for you
I am no hero,
Oh, that's for sure
Dave Matthews Band:
Where Are You Going?

Harry spent the morning and afternoon with Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. They stayed in the Room of Requirement because they knew that they wouldn't be interrupted or overheard there. Harry had a great time with them catching up on all their news. Hermione felt guilty about his grades, but she quieted once Harry asked for her help.

Harry was glad to have Ron back. He hadn't smiled so guiltlessly for weeks. He laughed so hard when Ron told him about Neville's accidental charm. Neville's charm had caused Malfoy's textbook to fly around hitting "bad" Slytherins on the head repetitively. It was almost easy to forget about the war going on beyond the walls.

But the war had moved into the castle. How could he face Dean, Cho, Justin, and Blaise with the knowledge he had? Could he really face them at the D.A. meeting he had scheduled for the next day? He wasn't looking forward to it, but was there time to reschedule it later in the week? No, if he remembered correctly it was his only free moment in the coming week.

"What's the matter, luv?" Ginny asked softly.

"Nothing," he lied automatically.

"Don't lie to us," she responded lovingly.

"I'm thinking about canceling the D.A. meeting tomorrow," he answered truthfully.

"Why?" Hermione asked curiously.

"He's feeling guilty about last night," Ginny answered for him.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione sighed softly. “Sometimes you’re way too sympathetic.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, bristling. “I watched as their families were killed by Death Eaters. I watched as the Death Eaters enjoyed every moment of pain and misery,” he yelled standing up. “It wasn’t just a simple Avada Kedavra, Hermione! The Death Eaters tortured them to death! And I had to watch every moment of it! Every single, heart wrenching moment of it!” He walked over to the cliff edge and stared out over the ocean. He rubbed at his scar angrily. “And they put this God-forsaken mark on their foreheads! Just to prove a point! Just to let me know that they’re out there!” He turned back to face his three stunned friends. “Tell me how I’m supposed to face Dean, Justin, Blaise, and Cho knowing that?”

Harry turned his back to them, fuming. They thought he was a weak sentimental fool! He didn’t arbitrarily choose to feel sorry for them. He had his reasons and in his mind they were good ones. How could anyone face those four knowing what he knew about their families’ deaths? Anyone who wasn’t a Death Eater or one of their kind shouldn’t be able to.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Hermione apologized softly. “I didn’t mean to offend you.” Harry shrugged and ignored them.

The weather had changed for the worse. A huge storm hit the plateau and Harry stood against the elements. The wind tore at his clothes, trying to push him over the edge. The rain pelted his body, soaking him through and through. The waves crashed hard into the bottom of the cliff, trying to destroy the base.

The weather reflected Harry’s mood exactly. He had no answers and it was driving him insane. He was so confused and all he wanted were answers to his questions. Not knowing what to do was pushing at the edges of his sanity. Maybe he should go talk to Thia; she’d have something to say that would help.

He turned and left the Room of Requirement, not telling his three friends where he was going. As he walked down the hallway he took

out the fake galleon and stared at it. He shook his head and put it away. He couldn't cancel the meeting without talking to someone else first.

"Hello, Harry," Thia said, sticking her head through the door. "What can I do for you?" Harry could tell that Thia was angry. Though she was good at covering it, he had been training with her too long not to know when she was furious inside.

"I need to talk to you," Harry answered, against his better judgment. He should have just left, but when Thia stepped away from the door he walked into the room. He knew exactly why she was angry; Remus and Tonks were both there.

"If you two could leave, I need to talk to Harry," Thia told them shortly.

"No, actually, I'd like to talk to all three of you," Harry said, motioning them to sit back down.

"Why'd you come here, Harry?" Thia asked. He told them about what he had seen and his problem with having the meeting tomorrow. The four sat in silence as they thought about Harry's words.

"You can't just desert them, Harry," Thia told him. "They chose to follow you, and you need to pay that back. But you'll also be asked questions, because they'll guess that you know."

"Just think about it from their point of view," Tonks told him. "If you were them, would you want to know how your family died?"

Harry thought about it for a bit before he answered. "I did want to know how my mum and dad died, but now that I do know, I wish I didn't."

"Harry," Remus said slowly. "They chose to fight at your side, and support you one hundred percent. If they want to know then that's also their choice. You can't make that choice for them."

"And it's not like you can hide from them at Hogwarts," Thia informed him. "You'll see three of them in class every day and you'll see Cho in

the hallways. But as for the meeting, well, neither Minerva nor I can be there, so that solves that problem. I was going to tell you in the morning.” There was a silence after that, and Harry contemplated whether or not to say what he was thinking.

“Well, goodbye,” he said standing, making his decision. “Look, I know how hard it is to forgive a friend, but you guys need to pull it together. I miss our weekend training sessions; now is not the time to lose two good teachers for some trivial thing. I need to be trained, and I need training now.” He walked over to the door and stopped to look at them. “Anyways, if we’re fighting amongst ourselves it’ll make it easier for Voldemort to win.”

Harry climbed into his bed later that night thinking about his day. He had switched the date for Saturday night, even though it was Valentine’s Day. He had already received a few complaints, but it was truly the only other day for the meeting.

He hoped that he’d be able to sleep, but didn’t really expect it. He slipped into slumber and was greeted with a nightmare he had started to hate beyond all others. He watched as all those he loved were paraded in front of him, dead, killed by Voldemort or his Death Eaters. He listened as they condemned him. And they were right. They were so right.

Harry awoke, covered in cold sweat and twisted up in his sheets. He walked over to the window and looked out over the school grounds. It was peaceful out there, but only on these grounds. Outside the wards that protected the school, they were fighting a war. And the outcome of that war rested on his shoulders. The irony of fate sickened Harry. Wouldn’t it be ironic if he survived destroying Voldemort, but none of his friends and family did? It would be his luck. Everything he was fighting for, everything that made life worth living, would be gone, and he’d be alone.

Harry looked at the closed curtains around Ron’s bed. He was glad he had Ron back and Hermione back, but he didn’t know how he’d survive if they actually died. It had been horrible without them, though deep down he always hoped for the reunion. But if they died...

Harry shook his head, ending that train of thought. He wasn't going to allow Voldemort the opportunity to kill them. It was that simple. There was nothing more to it. He would rather die than lose them. He would die for them.

He slipped back under the covers and laid his head down. He spent the rest of that night in and out of dreams and reality, never quite sure which was which.

The next week passed only slightly better than the previous weeks. The golden trio was reunited and Harry was thankful for that. Meals were punctuated with Cho's sobs and each one would drive a blade through Harry's heart. Dean hardly smiled, which was something odd for the fun-loving boy. Blaise was bitter and had little patience for Malfoy and his group. And Justin was angry, even snapping at teachers.

Harry didn't sleep once that week without nightmares. Not that this was particularly odd, but the death parade dream showed up every night. And then the nightmares stemming from the weekend's horror were even harder to bear in the morning when he faced his classmates.

Students and teachers alike commented on Harry's sleep deprived state, though his grades did improve, thanks to Hermione's careful care. He became disoriented easily and had a hard time concentrating. He was falling to pieces. Althea and Druce both tried to talk to Harry; Althea as a healer, sensing Harry's need for healing and Druce as an older friend who had seen much from life. Harry tried to talk back, but he found it hard. Though he was comfortable with these two people, he couldn't talk to them about his problems. He couldn't even tell Ginny about them, so what hope did he have to talk to his two teachers.

"Sit," Druce informed Harry during their last class of the week. The spell Harry had just cast had just gone awry for the fourth time in a row. It was a spell that Druce had taught him during their first week together, and there was no excuse for the problems. Harry sat at the chair Druce had pointed at. "I think we need to talk. You have great potential, Harry. I mean that, better potential than I will ever have. Yet,

if you don't use it, if you don't apply yourself, it's a wasted gift. I hate when people waste their gifts. You've had a hard week, let alone month, but I don't have time to teach you if you don't put more into this class. I have other things that I could be doing, but I'm here. I'm here to help you, Harry, not as a favor to Thia, not as a favor to the Headmaster, not as a favor to Professor Flitwick. I'm here for you.

"Don't waste my time," Druce repeated. "You don't waste mine, and I won't waste yours. I can teach you things that will help you. Things that will make you stronger, spells that will help you defeat your enemies."

"Do you know who my enemies are?" Harry asked, finally getting the chance to find out if he knew about the Prophecy.

"I know that the Dark Lord has an odd interest in you," Druce replied. "I don't know why. Dumbledore wants me to teach you everything I know and he says it's the utmost importance. Yet, I cannot teach someone not willing to work. I have my own work, which I put aside to teach you. I'll give you until the end of next week to improve. If you do not, I'm going home."

Harry nodded. It was fair enough. "I want you to know why I need to be trained, though," Harry finally said. He told Druce the Prophecy and everything that Dumbledore had told him about it. Druce listened without interruptions, taking everything in.

Druce studied Harry for a long time after that. Harry started to feel uncomfortable as Druce continued his silent contemplation. "This changes nothing about what I just said. You must learn discipline, and the only way I can teach that is by giving you consequences. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Harry replied. "I do understand. I'm sorry about my failure."

"Don't mention it, just improve your dedication."

The next morning, Harry told Bryant about the Prophecy. Bryant's reaction was typical Bryant. He thought about it for a few moments, told Harry to pick up his sword, and then Bryant proceeded to beat

the crap out of Harry. Harry smiled at his weapons master. Some things never changed.

Harry told Althea right before lunch. She had just delivered her warning, and she thought about the new information carefully. After a few minutes, she gave him a month to improve, instead of two weeks. Harry was grateful to her and told her that.

"Luv, I want you to take a Dreamless Sleep Potion tonight," Ginny told him that Friday night. "It wouldn't be good if you slept through our date and the D.A. meeting afterwards." Harry smiled at her and nodded. He had already thought of that.

"I think I'll go get it now then," Harry said, swaying unsteadily as he stood up.

"I'm coming with you, luv," Ginny said, catching him before he completely lost his balance. They walked slowly up to the infirmary and Ginny did all the talking. Madame Pomfrey was more than willing to give Harry the potion, but she wasn't willing to let him leave.

"I'll sleep better in my own bed," Harry told her angrily. After a bit more arguing, Madam Pomfrey finally relented and the two left for the Gryffindor common room.

Harry swallowed the potion thankfully and laid his head against the pillow. He let out a sigh and gratefully let the potion work its magic. He fell into a deep sleep but it wasn't dreamless. The death parade nightmare had an all night showing, repeating itself over and over again.

Harry couldn't break out of the grip of the potion. It wouldn't let him wake until the morning. So he watched in horror as his friends circled around him, dead. They blasted accusations at him and then they wouldn't accept his apologies. That was almost the worst part of this nightmare.

Finally, the potion wore off and Harry woke up. He rolled out of bed and took a freezing cold shower, trying to shake the despair from his body. He dressed wearily and then headed down the stairs to sit

before the fire. Ginny found him there an hour later, staring vacantly into the flames.

“Morning, luv,” she said, gently kissing his cheek. Harry smiled up at her and stood to leave with her.

“Let’s go get breakfast,” he said, grabbing her hand and leading her out of the common room. Once they were done eating, they went to get their cloaks and walked out of the castle. It was unbelievably wintry. The wind was icy cold and the sky was filled with dark clouds that threatened to storm at any moment.

They quickly walked to Hogsmeade and made their way to Weasley Wizarding Wheezes. They spent some time talking with the twins and made a few purchases. They then headed down the street, going into several stores to warm up. At noon they went to the Three Broomsticks and ate lunch. They meet Ron and Hermione there and spent the afternoon talking with them.

Harry had a hard time keeping his eyes open; even though he hadn’t woken up once during the night, the sleep hadn’t been anywhere near restful. All three of his friends noticed the dark rimmed eyes and the drooping eyelids and exchanged worried looks. No one said anything, and Harry didn’t notice their concern.

They headed back to Hogwarts as six o’clock neared. Harry was dreading the meeting more than anything. He didn’t want to face the questions, he didn’t want to think, and he didn’t want to lead. He just wanted to sleep, but he’d never gotten exactly what he wanted before. Why should this time be different?

They stopped first at the common room and they changed into completely dry clothes. Harry felt some comfort as his body warmed back up, but it was also making him drowsy. He wanted to make it through this meeting and then to go to sleep and not wake up for a long, long time.

Harry walked down the stairs with Ron and they walked over to the waiting girls. Ginny automatically snaked her arm around his waist, and Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulder. The four walked to

the Room of Requirement and got it ready for the meeting. Slowly people started to arrive, in groups of two's and three's. They took seats around the fireplace, sitting on pillows and rugs. Harry was leaning against the fireplace, his back to the gathering group.

Thia entered followed by the last two people. Because Harry had his back to the group, he didn't even notice the fact. The D.A. sat in silence waiting for their leader to speak. The clock was slowly ticking the seconds away and still Harry said nothing. Ginny exchanged a quick glance with Hermione and then spoke up.

"Luv, everyone's here." She waited for a response, but none came. "Harry?" She stood and walked over to him. He had fallen asleep and hadn't heard her. She shook him gently and he woke with a start.

"Sorry," he mumbled to the waiting students.

"What's the matter, Harry?" Susan Bones asked with a voice filled with worry. A cloud covered Harry's face, but he didn't say anything. "Why are you so tired?" she asked, trying a different question.

"I haven't slept well in a while," he answered truthfully. Susan was shocked by the admission; Harry never admitted to anything without a fight. Others stared, just as surprised. Ginny wasn't sure, but she was almost positive that he had finished with a muttered, "Not in a long while."

There was an unpleasant pause as Harry tried to pull himself together enough to teach a lesson. He had had come up with a lesson plan for last Sunday, but he had not been able to remember it. So instead he had spent time creating a new plan. But now that the time to put it into action had come, he couldn't remember it either.

He stared at each face slowly, taking in the small details. Susan, who had recovered from her shock, was thinking about something with a lot of care. Cho's red-rimmed eyes were trying to hide the suffering on the inside. Ginny flashed him a small smile, encouraging him to be strong. Dean, who hadn't laughed once this week, was silently begging Harry for some enlightenment. Blaise sat nearest the door, his arm wrapped around Sephra for support and strength. Hannah

Abbot was talking quietly with Lavender, and her face shone with the passion she felt for whatever the topic was. Justin, a Muggle-born, had just lost his family because of his choice to side with Harry. Zachariah Smith, who could be a right arse when he wanted to, was talking quietly with a Fifth year Slytherin girl, holding her hand and smiling softly. Who'd have thought?

Harry's eyes wandered over each of his students. At the start of the year, few had truly known what being at war meant. Now they all knew; whether with first-hand experience or through the pain of others, they knew. He couldn't believe that less than six months could change this small group of students so completely.

"Harry," Justin said, breaking the silence. "What's the matter? Is there anything I can do to help?" Harry looked at him with surprise. It should be him comforting Justin, not the other way around. But what was the matter; truly what was the matter? He shook his head, saying "no" quite effectively.

"Harry, how do I deal with this... this...?" Cho asked waving her hands vaguely, trying to find a word to describe it. He didn't know how to answer that. How do you deal with it? He had no idea, none whatsoever.

"I-I don't know," Harry said honestly. "I just don't know, Cho." She, and everyone else, looked at him with a mixture of shock and fear. If Harry didn't know, then how would she get through it?

Harry turned to look at Thia, begging her silently for help. She wasn't looking at him, but at the flames. He couldn't get her attention, and so he turned back to the waiting students. He thought hard, desperately hoping to remember any of his plans for the meeting. Nothing came to him and he started to panic.

What was going on? Why couldn't he teach a simple class? What should he do? What could he do?

"What happened Friday night?" Blaise asked forcefully. "We've all heard about the nightmare you had, and I want to know what it was."

Harry felt himself slowly fall into the panic. He couldn't talk about that. He didn't want to talk about it. Not to these four people, not to all these people sitting here. Ginny noticed the panic and stood quickly. She grabbed his hand and whispered into his ear.

"Luv, you need to tell them the truth," she told him with all the comfort and stability he needed. "They deserve the truth." He looked at her and started to calm down. His eyes glanced over the group and he noticed the embarrassed looks and awkward movements.

"Great," he whispered back, "I've made a fool of myself in front of everyone."

"They'll forgive you, luv," she whispered with a smile. A chair, much like his favorite in the Gryffindor common room, appeared and he sat in it. Ginny took her normal spot on the armrest and absently ran her fingers through his hair.

"I..." he started but stopped, trying to figure out the best way to tell them. "There's no easy way to say this. So I'm going to apologize from the start." He told them in a slow measured voice what he had seen. He told them most of the details and embellished if they asked to know more. He nearly choked on his tongue when Cho started to cry in earnest. The boys sat in silence listening with wide-eyed looks. He stumbled over Voldemort's comment to Blaise's parents, but he got it out eventually.

He continued slowly with the rest of the agonizing events that had occurred next. He told them of Justin's family's plea for understanding. And then the orders Bella had acted on. He couldn't get past the horror of realizing what she had done. He couldn't tell them of the slow minutes that came next as the process was repeated to all of the victims.

There was a long pause once Harry stopped talking. The four were crying; Cho violently, Dean and Justin silently, but Blaise only shed a few tears and had already stopped. The D.A. members sat once again in stunned silence, not quite sure on how to react. The girls had it easy and started to cry and hug Cho. But the guys battled with horror and grief with no way to respond.

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly.

"For what?" Blaise asked. Harry looked at him and shook his head to clear it.

"For making Voldemort target your families," Harry answered, "for antagonizing him to the point of this attack."

"It's not your fault," Cho said, surprisingly strong and assured. "It's Vol-Voldemort's, not yours." It was probably her use of Voldemort's name that shocked Harry into believing her, but believe he did. There was a long pause.

"Are our parents going to be protected?" a fifth year Hufflepuff named Alissa asked. Harry looked at his hands not wanting to answer.

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "But I'd doubt it."

"What do you mean, 'You doubt it'?" a seventh year Ravenclaw named Mark asked angrily. Harry winced.

"Because I do," Harry answered him. "Why waste time and energy protecting a group of families that Voldemort might attack again. I don't think he would attack if they were protected."

"Isn't that the point of having a guard?" Michael Corner asked.

"Yes, but it's a waste of manpower," Harry answered. "I don't think Voldemort will attack your families again, at least not under the same pretense. By now he's moved on to planning his next Revelry. He's not concerned with sending the same message twice."

"Why can't they be protected?" someone asked, but Harry couldn't place the voice with a name.

"Because they can't," Harry said, standing up wearily.

"Some advice, Harry," Blaise told him quietly. Harry looked at the boy and nodded for him to continue. "You can't be a wreck. You aren't

allowed that luxury.” Blaise glared at Ginny and Hermione as they started to argue with him. “I’m not saying this to be mean, but this school looks at two people for strength and assurances: Professor Dumbledore and Harry Potter. If you two can continue fighting then so can they. But as soon as it becomes too much for one or both of you, they’ll lose heart.

“I didn’t choose this side because it was going to lose. I chose this side because they offered the best chance at a future I want to live. But if people start giving up, then we’ll lose, hands down.” He looked at Harry intensely. “I don’t want to lose.”

Harry stared right back at him, trying, but failing to keep his temper. When another fifth year asked another why their parents weren’t being protected Harry snapped. He knew, deep down, that he would regret this when he was done, but at the moment only letting his temper loose mattered.

“You want to know how you can protect them?” he asked rhetorically. “You can quit. You can turn your back on this club and never attend another meeting. There is nothing I can do!

“You see me as some hero,” he told them forlornly. “I’m a sixteen-year-old boy, still at Hogwarts. There is nothing I can do! If you want the school to do something, go talk with Dumbledore. But I wouldn’t if I were you. It would probably only cause the closing of the D.A. It would be too dangerous to keep it open. You want to fight?” There were several automatic nods.

“Well, guess what, you’re going to hurt,” he told them starkly, without hiding the truth. “I tried to tell you that at the start of the year. I told you all that I thought you were lucky. You had your families. My only family hates me and what I am. Voldemort ripped the rest from me: my parents, my godfather, my parents’ best friends. That’s war, plain and simple.

“I’ll be strong,” Harry said bitterly, “if that’s what it takes to keep your resolve strong. But I can’t fix the world. I’m sixteen! I’m not a super hero! I’m just me and only me.” He looked at them once more and

then stormed out of the room. No one tried to follow. He walked up to the dorms, took out the Journal, and started writing Ginny a letter.

Ginny exchanged a worried look with Hermione, Ron, and Thia, before taking over the meeting. Everyone was stunned, but none were nearly as surprised as these four. They thought Harry had accepted his fate. Well, I guess not, Ginny told herself.

"What was that?" someone asked. Ginny looked at them, shaking her head in annoyance.

"That was a sixteen-year-old being pushed to his limits," Ginny answered angrily. "Didn't you stop to think about it from Harry's point of view?" They shook their heads no. "He has no family of his own. He has been 'adopted' into one, but it's not truly his. You want him to protect your families. You insisted on it, even. But he couldn't even protect his own; he couldn't keep his Godfather from dieing or his parents. How can you possibly expect him to protect yours? He's only sixteen. What can you expect?"

There was an embarrassed silence. "He's running on empty. A month and a half of fighting with one's best friend and years of habitual nightmares and weekly visions from Voldemort wears a person down. He watches as innocent people are murdered. He's sick from it, from the pressure. He loves teaching you guys, but you demand things he can't give." She looked at them and noticed the looks of guilt on their faces.

"Look, if he could, he would protect your families," she said trying to fix any rifts. "But he's only human. He can't even protect those closest to him, and it destroys him. You complained when he moved the meeting date, even though it wasn't his fault. Even though he was in trauma. He might not have known who died, but he knew why. And now he watches as four of his friends are wracked with grief that even he doesn't understand. And he's been through it a lot this year."

"We didn't know," Susan said once she was sure Ginny was done.

"Of course you didn't," Ginny said with a faint smile. "Would Harry be Harry if he told us exactly what he's thinking, except when he loses his temper?" Others smiled weakly and nodded in agreement. "Just give him a little space, and he'll get around to apologizing soon enough. Goodnight." Everyone left, talking quietly. "Wait," Ginny called to the departing students. "Let's keep this to ourselves. As Blaise so correctly stated, the student body draws strength from Harry, so let's keep this quiet. They have enough of their own problems as it is." The group nodded and filtered out of the room. Soon it was only Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and Thia in the room.

"He told you all of that?" Ron asked amazed.

"Yes and no," she answered slowly, sitting gratefully in Harry's empty chair. "I've learnt to 'read' him. He says a lot without saying anything. Glances and nervous habits say so much once you start to listen."

"I think you three should give him some space tonight," Thia told them. "Bombard him tomorrow, but give him the night to sort everything out." They nodded in understanding. "Would you tell him that Remus, Tonks, and I expect him at noon tomorrow for a training session?"

"You guys worked it all out then?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Yeah," Thia answered with a thankful sigh. "Something Harry said hit home last week and we've worked it all out. So, Operation Wedding is back in full swing. And I found a great place for the actual ceremony."

"Where?" Ginny asked.

"Not telling," she said with a smile. "It's a secret." This seemed to end the conversation, so the three Gryffindors said goodnight to Thia and walked slowly to the Gryffindor tower.

Dear Gin,

I'm not sure what just happened. I was so angry and all I could do was vent out my thoughts. I didn't really have a choice, because my

temper has been building for weeks now. I'm not sure if anyone will want to come back.

Do you think I was right in yelling at them?

Oh well, it's too late now.

I'm glad I have Ron and Hermione back. I shudder to think about how horrible this week would have been without them. It was hard enough as it was.

I'm sorry that Valentine's Day was such a let down. I just couldn't come up with anything to make it special. Forgive me? I'll try to make it up, 'cause you deserve better than that.

The Dreamless Sleep Potion didn't work last night. It did keep me asleep, but it didn't keep the nightmares away. I wonder if that's common or not. I think I'm going to ask for one tomorrow night and then Friday night again. Hopefully it'll work because I really need sleep. I'm so tired.

Thanks for pulling me back from the panic tonight. I appreciate it. Do you think I was too brutal with the telling of that vision? I'm still not sure if it was appropriate or not. Once again, too late now.

I wonder if I'm meeting with Thia tomorrow. She never said anything this week. I'll have to talk with her in the morning. I hope so, because it's so important for me to learn everyt (His writing trailed off before starting up again.)

Gin, I'm scared. I'm terrified. Every night this week I watched that nightmare from Christmas repeat itself. And then last night, that was all I saw. I'm petrified by the thought of losing you and Ron and Hermione and everyone else. The next time we're able to talk alone, I want to tell you about it. It helps when I talk to you, so hopefully I'll be able to tell you. Though no promises, and please don't push too hard.

Gin, please, don't ever leave me. Don't you dare! I won't be able to live without you or Ron or Hermione. I just don't know how to tell

them that. At least I can write it down and tell you, but I can't tell them (or you) out loud. It's too difficult and I don't know how.

Thanks for listening... or reading this. I'm sorry to burden you with this all.

Yours forever,

Harry

Harry didn't re-read what he wrote. He cleared the pages and walked out of the dorm under his invisibility cloak. He wandered through the halls until he arrived in the Owlery. He quickly found Hedwig's white silhouette and called her to him. He told her to deliver the package to Ginny, but not to wake her. If she could manage it, he would like her to set it down on Ginny's pillow.

Hedwig nipped his ear in affection and then took the strings of the package into her beak. Harry watched as Hedwig flew out the window and up to the Gryffindor girls' dorm. He stayed there, staring out at the Forbidden Forest. He let his mind drift, thinking of nothing, yet thinking of everything. The events of the past week played before his mind's eye. It had been a long week. It would have been even longer without Ron and Hermione. At least he had them back. He wouldn't have made it through the week without them.

He turned around slowly and placed the cloak around his shoulders. He walked through the empty halls once more. They were deserted. Not another soul was walking them. That made sense, as it was long past midnight. He reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, giving her the password without taking the cloak off. She didn't even open her eyes, but just swung open. Harry walked into the empty common room.

He threw off the cloak and then climbed the last set of stairs to his room. He entered and then hurriedly changed into pajamas. He climbed into bed and then laid his head down, hoping just once, that he'd not dream of anything. Though he had his normal nightmares, they weren't as vicious or as hard to bear. Except for the last one. The death parade returned in all of its glory.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Death Parade

I lie awake on a long dark night
I can't seem to tame my mind.
Slings and arrows are killing me inside.
Creed: Weathered

Ginny made her way over to a rather vacant Harry the next morning. She sat next to him and snuggled into his chest, offering all the comfort she could to him. He smiled at her weakly and leaned into the embrace. He was so happy to have such a great girlfriend.

They sat like that for the better part of an hour, before Hermione made her way over to them. She greeted them and they returned the greeting. Hermione sat across from them and observed the other two. Hermione loved to watch Ginny take care of Harry like she did. Harry was so love-starved, that watching the two interact was priceless. Several others came down from the dormitories as they waited for Ron. None of them stayed, but heading down for breakfast instead.

Ron, finally, made his way down and Hermione made room for him on her armchair. He maneuvered her onto his lap. Hermione snuggled into his chest, thankful that all was well between the two of them.

Harry stood, glancing at Ginny meaningfully. Ginny stood and glanced over at Ron and her. Harry looked over at them, and Hermione could see the indecision clearly on his face. What was going on between the two?

"I want to talk to you guys," Harry said and grabbed Ginny's hand tightly. What's this about? Hermione thought to herself, feeling her incurable curiosity begin to take hold of her.

Harry led them to the Room of Requirement and they waited patiently as he paced before the wall. They entered the now familiar door and settled under the large oak tree. Harry took his normal spot looking out to sea and Ginny sat next to him.

As Harry hesitated, Hermione's thoughts wandered over their surroundings. She knew Harry would get around to saying what he wanted; she'd wait. But in the meantime she was stunned with the feelings of beauty and loneliness this place invoked in her.

She couldn't deny that the views were spectacular or that she loved the ocean, but somehow this place seemed so lonely. They were in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by emptiness. Harry found solitude here, a place to think clearly. She always needed to be around others to think the clearest. She didn't like loud noise, but a quiet murmur or slightly louder was a comfort.

Up here, it was all but silent, unless there was a storm. There was no storm today. The grass, wind, ocean, and everything else seemed to be exhausted. She had picked up on the connection the weather had to Harry's mood. She and Ginny had talked about it more than once. This new change of weather worried her; Harry was so listless lately and his eyes showed his exhaustion so vividly. She hoped it was just physical tiredness and not emotional. However, she wouldn't be surprised if he was emotionally drained as well.

At least he had had Ginny this past month. She was hurt that Harry had turned to Ginny; at least she had been at the beginning. She had been Harry's friend a lot longer than Ginny had, but he hadn't turned to Ginny for a friend. He turned to her for the comfort only a girlfriend could give and the acceptance that only a girlfriend could give. Once she realized that, she had resigned herself to wait the two boys out. Hermione didn't want to find herself in the middle of their fight, just as she had been in fourth year.

"Harry," Ron said, breaking the silence. Hermione shot him a warning look. Harry needed to push himself to action. Ron ignored her and continued once Harry acknowledged him. "Thia wanted us to tell you that she, Remus, and Tonks expect to see you at noon for a training session. She also wanted us to thank you for whatever it was you said to them last week." Hermione started and looked at him; she had completely forgotten.

"That's good," Harry responded with a small smile.

"And she found a place for the wedding," Ginny said brightly. Hermione could tell she was worried for her boyfriend.

Harry was relieved that those three had started talking once again. He hoped that he would have a productive session with them later. And Thia found a place for the wedding, "That's great!" he said in a voice as cheerful as he could make it.

He knew Ginny heard the forced out cheeriness, but all she did was latch onto him tighter. He was gathering up the courage to tell them the nightmare that had plagued him the most. He thought that maybe the reason for the frequent showings was that he hadn't told Ginny or anyone else about it. He hoped it was the reason.

Hermione was saying something, but he wasn't really listening. He had to start speaking soon or he'd never get the courage to start. He waited for Hermione to finish whatever she was saying, but he became too impatient.

"I'm ready now," he said interrupting Hermione. He knew she'd forgive him eventually. "Can we go sit on the beach?" Ginny nodded and the two jumped off the edge together. They landed softly and the other two followed quickly.

Harry led Ginny down to the water's edge and they sat where the water just touched their toes. (They had quickly taken their shoes off.) Ron and Hermione sat on the other side of Ginny and looked out at the horizon with him. He thought about how to start, but couldn't find the words with which to start.

"What's bothering you, luv?" Ginny asked softly. He gave her a glance filled with all of his problems, but soon he had the walls up to keep her from seeing them.

"That stupid dream from Christmas break," he finally answered. "I just don't know how to start."

"The beginning's as good a place as anywhere," Ron said, pretending to stroke a long beard. Harry smiled at him gratefully and looked at the hand he had entwined with Ginny's.

"I don't know if I told you guys about a dream I had in a Dark Arts class at the beginning of the year," he said, looking at them. By their blank stares, he knew he hadn't. "Well, the content of that dream doesn't matter, except that the place it took place in is the same place this dream takes place."

"That's too many 'places', Harry!" Ron exclaimed. "You shouldn't use a word more than once in any given sentence."

"Sorry," Harry said, smiling his first true smile all week. "It's a huge room and the only light coming in is from a window near the ceiling. The light from it is shining directly on me. The room is empty except for me. And then the door opens and in walks Bill. He's..." Harry stopped, looking around frantically. Ginny tightened her grip on his hand and started whispering calming words to him. "He's dead," Harry continued, silencing Ginny. "He's limping 'cause he's missing a foot. He's glaring at me, accusing me. Charlie follows him in, burnt. Completely burnt," he mumbled hoarsely. "Shacklebolt walks into the room and he looks fine, except he has a hole through his gut."

He stopped and collected himself. He felt the revulsion from Ginny and knew the silence from his best friends was caused by shock. "Then Fred and George enter, holding onto each other. They're each missing a side of them and are supporting each other. They join Bill, Charlie, and Shacklebolt circling me, and sending silent condemnations my way. Then Remus walks through the door carrying Tonks. She's limp and torn. Remus looks fine, except for his eyes. They're looking at me with so much hatred."

He went through each of the things he saw: Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Mr. Weasley, and Dumbledore. He paused when he got to Ginny, Hermione, and Thia. Somehow he couldn't say it. Not with them sitting right next to him. He leaned back, not caring enough to hold himself up any longer.

"What happened to me?" Ginny asked quietly, laying down next to him and softly running her fingers through his hair.

“Hermione and Thia enter, supporting you, just like Ron and Mr. Weasley were holding Dumbledore,” he started. “I’ve never seen you three anything but strong, but here in this dream...” He thought slowly about the pain radiating from them. “You’re defeated, broken.” Ginny paused her stroking for only a second and then continued, sensing Harry’s need for touch and comfort.

“Bill tells me that I was only reason that you all died,” Harry went on in a small voice. “Charlie tells me that Voldemort found it amusing that he died from burns that weren’t caused by dragons. Shacklebolt tells me that the spell that destroyed his abdomen didn’t kill him; that he died slowly and painfully. The twins said in a monotone that they didn’t find Voldemort’s take on Siamese twins amusing. Remus had to watch as they tortured Tonks to death right in front of him, but then the Death Eaters didn’t find him worthy enough for anything more than the Avada Kedavra. Mrs. Weasley told me that she was dead long before she was finally killed; the news of her sons’ deaths had destroyed her. Ron, you... you...” Harry couldn’t continue. He couldn’t.

“What did I say, Harry?” Ron said in quiet disbelief.

“You blamed me for it all. For everything,” Harry said in a monotone very similar to the one the twins had used in the nightmare. “Then your dad said that I should have protected you all, because you had taken me in as your own. Dumbledore had failed me and in failing me, failed the world. He had grown too old. But...” He stopped; there was no way he wanted to continue.

“Thia, Hermione, and Ginny stopped circling and so did everyone else,” he continued. “Thia and Hermione yelled at me to look at you three and see what he had broken you three into.” Harry rolled away from Ginny’s touch and stood up to pace.

“What did I say, luv?” Ginny asked from where she now lay on her stomach. Harry looked at her briefly and then away. He shouldn’t; he couldn’t; he wouldn’t. “Please, luv?” she begged quietly.

“You try to say something, but can’t get it out,” Harry started. He wondered when his brain had given his mouth permission to speak.

"That I had let something happen. You stopped and then asked me how I could let that happen. Your voice was filled with betrayal." Ginny stood and hugged him tightly.

For the first time since they had started dating, he jerked away from her embrace. "Let me finish!" he said angrily. Ginny sat back down, a study of dejection. "Bill and Ron screamed at me, telling me that I let them... that..." He screamed in frustration. "They raped you three," he finally got out in a voice so small and so filled with suffering that Ginny felt her heart break once again for the man she loved. "I tried to apologize, but you guys wouldn't accept it. Bill said that it did little good to you now."

He stopped pacing and turned to face them. They sat in horror of such a nightmare. No wonder he had been running on empty. That kind of habitual nightmare would wear anyone out.

"I think it's just a 'normal' nightmare, not a vision or anything from Voldemort," he finally said.

"Harry Potter!" Ginny said standing up briskly. "I want a hug!" He looked at her with surprised and then hugged her fiercely. He needed the hug as much as she did. "I wish your subconscious wasn't out to get you," she said angrily. "It's just not fair to you! It is just a dream! Remember that, luv! None of us blame you for anything that Voldemort decides to do. You need to stop taking on extra worries and concentrate on the worries you already have!"

"She's right, mate," Ron said standing. "I promise to hate you only for things you do yourself. I'm not going to hate you for something Voldemort does!" Harry smiled thankful for his friends. He turned to Hermione, who had remained silent throughout the whole telling.

"A Knut for you thoughts," Harry said to her.

"Harry, I know you're not going to like this, but I'm going to say it anyways," she started and Harry felt himself brace for whatever she was about to say. "You need help with your nightmares. You're trying to stop the visions and one must expect some caused by trauma, but

all these extra ones. Harry, you need to start actually sleeping at night. You need to get some help.”

“I’m coping,” Harry said angrily.

“No, you’re not!” she yelled, standing up to face him. “You’re exhausted. Your grades are below average. You don’t sleep. You’re hardly eating. Harry, why can’t you see your need for help?”

Harry stared at her hard. He didn’t need help! “She’s right, luv,” Ginny’s small voice came from below his chin.

He sighed. “Alright, but talking has helped with other dreams. This one’s been the worst lately, so maybe it’ll go away now.” The others nodded, unsure about his words. “I’ll tell you if they don’t get better,” he promised them. He glanced at his watch and nearly jumped. It was almost noon. “I’ve got to go!” A door appeared in the cliff and Harry left running to his training session with Thia, Remus, and Tonks.

By the time Harry arrived in the Dark Arts room, he was late, but not as late as he could have been. If he hadn’t been running around the lake twice a week he would have collapsed on the way.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he gasped out to the tree adults. “I was talking about stuff with Ron, Hermione, and Ginny.”

“What kind of stuff?” Tonks asked him. He looked at her and then sat hard on the ground.

“Can I have some water?” he asked. “I just ran here from the Room of Requirement.”

“That’s a fair distance,” Remus said surprised.

“Not, really,” Harry shrugged. He gulped the water Thia gave him in one go. “I run the lake twice a week, at the least.”

“That’s Bryant’s work?” Thia said with a smile. Harry nodded. “He’s impressed with your work ethic. He’s the only one of the three though.”

"Yeah, I had a bad month," Harry mumbled.

"That's what I told them," Thia said. "Okay, you're going to fight Tonks. Let's see how this goes." They spent the two hours dueling, discussing, and joking. Harry was happy to have all three adults back. Tonks was the jokester who could make him laugh no matter what his mood was. Thia had the immense knowledge he wanted to know. And Remus was the male presence and link to his parents that he needed.

After they were done with the training, they sat around the fire. Each was sipping a cup of tea. "So, I'm glad you two are back," he said to Remus and Tonks.

"It's good to be back, Harry," Tonks responded. "I missed you, kiddo." Harry bristled at the kiddo comment, but Tonks just laughed at him. "So is all well with you and Ron?"

"Yeah," Harry answered. "I'm glad that's over with."

"How are you doing today, Harry?" Thia asked concerned. He couldn't look her in the eyes. "What's the matter?"

"Friday night, I took a Dreamless Sleep Potion," he told them. "I needed sleep so desperately and Ginny really wanted me to take it, so I did."

"That's good," Remus commented.

"Yeah, but it didn't work properly," he told them about the odd effects it had on him.

"I don't think that's normal," Tonks commented. Harry just shook his head at her. "Hey, I'm just trying to be helpful."

"That's not good, Harry," Thia said softly. "That's not good at all. Either you've built up a resistance to one of the ingredients or the dreams were too powerful. I'll talk to Dumbledore and Madame Pomfrey about this. I should probably talk to Snape too."

"Don't talk to him," Harry pleaded. "We've actually gotten along lately and I don't need anything to ruin that. It makes my Mondays much easier."

"What's that like, getting along with Snape?" Remus asked curiously. "I've never had the privilege."

"I'm not sure," Harry answered. "He doesn't ignore the Gryffindors, but he doesn't single us out for punishments. If anyone does get singled out, it's the bad Slytherins who get it now. And I'm enjoying the new curriculum. We're learning about how to come up with antidotes for poisons we don't know and how to identify others."

"Snape is free to act as he wants now," Remus stated. "Are you still singled out?"

"Only when I don't watch my mouth," Harry informed them. "Then the punishments are only a little harsher than normal ones, but at least I'm actually committing the crimes I'm being punished for."

"That would be nice," Tonks agreed. "How did your Valentine's date go with Ginny?"

"Horrible," he grumbled.

"What went wrong?" Thia asked, trying desperately to hide the grin. Harry glared at her. "I'm sorry, but I don't think your parents had one Valentine's date go well."

"I couldn't keep my eyes open," Harry told them, ignoring Thia's smile. "I was so exhausted and I couldn't come up with anything special. So we went through the shops and spent the afternoon with Hermione and Ron in the Three Broomsticks." He stopped and looked at Thia. "I was thinking of doing something after the D.A. meeting, but you know how that went." Thia nodded. "I didn't mean to blow up."

"You had every right to," Thia told the boy. "They were asking you to do stuff they had no right to expect."

"I know, but I shouldn't have yelled at them," he muttered looking at his shoes.

"Harry, look at me," Remus commanded. Harry wouldn't look up, so Remus forced his chin up. "You're exhausted, anyone can tell that. They'll forgive you for losing your temper. And sometimes it's helpful when you do lose control. It's the only way we find out what's truly on your mind."

"If you say so," Harry mumbled back.

"I do," Remus replied. The corners of Harry's lips curled up in a smile. "Now, that's my boy."

"You could take her on a 'one week anniversary' date," Tonks advised him.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked quizzically.

"On Saturday, it'll be one week since your first Valentine's Day together as a couple," Tonks explained. "She'll love it. And it'll give you a second chance."

"Saturday's the Quidditch game, but that's a good idea," Harry admitted. "But what should we do?"

"Now that, Harry," Remus said sagely, "is completely up to you. Ginny would hurt us if we helped you."

"She wouldn't have to find out," Harry bargained with them.

"Do you really think you could keep it a secret?" Thia asked him.

"No."

"There you go," she replied with a laugh. "Don't worry, Harry, you'll come up with something."

"Thanks for all your help," Harry informed them, honestly. "Do you think I should take a Dreamless Sleep Potion tonight?"

“As of right now, no,” Thia said thoughtfully. “I’ll talk to Poppy as soon as you leave and then I’ll talk to Dumbledore. If they say it’s okay, then I’ll let you know. If they say no, then I won’t talk to you until Monday during class. Deal?”

“Deal.”

As it turned out, Madam Pomfrey said no to Harry taking the potion without further testing. Of course, the person who had to administer the extra testing was Professor Snape. After classes on Monday and Tuesday, Harry walked down to the dungeons.

The tests were varied and numerous. Some tests consisted of taking blood and having that tested. Others included injecting substances into Harry’s skin. Snape wasn’t all that bad, but Harry could tell that Snape felt he had better things to do. Snape did give Harry a bit of extra homework, though he didn’t mind that much. He was supposed to map how the Dreamless Sleep Potion worked and how the different ingredients affected the body. Harry enjoyed that part of the new Potions class, so he didn’t care.

The only thing he hated about this arrangement was that he had to cancel a lesson with Thia and skip a Quidditch practice the week of a game. There was the added problem that the tests left him tired and cross. Getting needles stuck into one will do that to a person. Finally, though, Wednesday came and Harry welcomed it gratefully. There were no tests that day; only the last Quidditch practice before their game against Hufflepuff that Saturday. The practice went smoothly and Harry and Katie felt confident in their team.

Thursday morning dawned bright, but Harry wasn’t worried about the beauty it held. He was more concerned about the sword swinging at his head. Pulling his sword up just in time, Harry blocked Bryant’s swing. Moving smoothly from the block into an attack of his own, Harry tried to sweep Bryant’s legs from underneath him. Bryant blocked it and swiftly disarmed Harry and had his sword at Harry’s neck.

“Surrender,” Harry said, and Bryant brought his sword down.

"That was a sloppy attack," Bryant informed him. "You need to remember your defenses even while you attack. By attacking my legs with that form, you opened yourself to disarming and death."

"Yes, sir," Harry told him, taking in every word Bryant said.

"Your mind isn't on your sword work at the moment," Bryant let him know. Harry nodded. "Why?"

"I'm thinking about my tests," Harry replied.

"Don't," Bryant instructed him. "The second you pick up a weapon to fight with, you must forget everything else. Anything, but the fight at hand, is a distraction that will get you killed."

"Yes, sir," Harry mumbled.

"What about these tests have you worried?" Bryant asked pulling his sword up to start the new duel.

"I'm just thinking about it," Harry replied, collecting his sword from where it had fallen. "There isn't much to worry about."

"Then let it go," Bryant instructed. Bryant went for his head again, Harry blocking it with a stroke. Moving fluidly from the defensive position into an offensive one, Harry went for Bryant's right side. Bryant blocked it and their swords got stuck at the hilt. The two combatants pushed with all their might, trying to overpower the other. Harry found the effort too much, so he broke away, preparing for the attack he knew was coming. And come it did.

The next two days passed quickly and it was soon Friday night. Harry made the slow climb to the Hospital Wing alone. He hadn't told anyone that he'd be receiving the test results that night.

He entered the room and walked between the beds until he reached Madam Pomfrey's office door. He knocked and was told to enter by Professor Dumbledore's voice. Along with Dumbledore and Pomfrey,

Snape, McGonagall, Thia, and Ginny were in the office. Ginny glared at him, but made room for him to sit next to her.

“Good evening, Mr. Potter,” Madame Pomfrey said happily. Harry responded in like. “Well, we have your test results back.”

“And?” Harry asked after a slight pause.

“Well, we’re not sure what happened,” she answered. “You haven’t built up a resistance to any of the ingredients and you are not allergic to any.”

“My guess, Mr. Potter,” Snape said politely in his oily voice, “is that the dream or dreams were too strong to be countered by the potion. It is an uncommon occurrence among one as young as you, but you have seen things to give many nightmares to anyone.” Harry nodded.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said in his paternal voice, “I’d like you to answer a few of Professor Snape’s questions. Thia is here in Molly’s stead. Molly did not like the prospect of you answering these questions alone. Minerva is here as your Head of House and Ginny is here for your support. Do you agree to answer the questions?”

Harry thought about it a moment. True, Snape hadn’t been his normal evil self since Christmas, but did he really want to answer all of Snape’s questions? He looked down at Ginny. How did she find about this? he asked himself. “Do I have to answer every question?” he asked out loud.

“It would be helpful if you did, but you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” Dumbledore answered. Harry looked at Snape. Snape didn’t seem all that happy about being here.

“Alright,” Harry agreed. “But if I don’t want to answer, I don’t answer.”

“Very well,” the old man agreed. “Severus, you may begin.”

“Was there more than one dream that night?” Snape began in a voice sounding very clinical.

"By more than one, do you mean different dreams or one dream repeating itself?" Harry asked.

"Different ones."

"Just one," Harry answered.

"I take it that this dream repeated itself," Snape guessed.

"Yes."

"How many times?"

"I don't remember," Harry answered and then he tried to count. "More times than I want to remember."

"Good enough." Snape wrote something down. "Is this a new dream or is it a repeat from another night?"

"A repeat."

"I see, and when did it occur first?" Snape asked while writing.

"Last few days of Christmas break," Harry answered, thinking back to that first night.

"Are you positive?"

"Yes."

"I see," Snape said absently, writing something down. "Does this stem from a real event?"

"No, not really."

"Explain."

"It involved people I know, but the events were created by my subconscious."

"I see," Severus mumbled quietly as he wrote something down. "And what would those events be?"

"No answer," Harry replied slowly. He wasn't about to go into detail with Snape.

"It would be helpful, Mr. Potter," Snape said glancing up at Harry.

"I know it would be, Professor Snape," Harry said respectfully. "But I don't want to talk about it."

"I see," Snape responded softly. He looked back at the papers in front of him. "Have you spoken about this dream to anyone?"

"Before Friday night, no," Harry answered. "Since then, yes."

"To whom?"

"My friends."

"I see." Snape glanced quickly at Ginny and then back at his papers. "Has the dream bothered you since speaking about it?"

"Once this week," Harry responded, looking at Ginny guiltily.

"Is this more or less than normal per week?" Snape asked ignoring the glare Ginny was giving Harry.

"Less," Harry answered. "Last week, I dreamt it every night. Normally though it's only two or three times."

"I see." Snape glanced at Thia before asking the next question. "How are your Occlumency shields?"

"They're just fine," Harry responded. "It keeps out nightmares from Voldemort."

"And this isn't from Voldemort?"

"No."

"I see."

"Could you stop saying that?" Ginny asked annoyed. Snape looked up at her with polite astonishment. "Could you stop saying, 'I see?' It's getting annoying."

"I will try," Snape replied politely. Ginny seemed to be at a loss for words as were Thia and McGonagall.

"Say 'thank you', Gin," Harry said with a huge smile.

"Thanks," Ginny said still stunned.

"What makes you so sure that it isn't from Voldemort?" Snape asked in a voice Harry would have called amused had it been anyone but Snape using it. Harry thought about it for a moment and then shook his head; he wasn't going to answer that question. "Well, that will make it difficult. Are you sure this was from your own subconscious?"

"As confident as I can be," Harry replied. "I know the events haven't occurred and I don't think Voldemort is planting anything in my head."

"Are you positive?" Snape asked again.

"Yes."

"Fine," Snape said writing something down. "And in severity, was it as bad this week?"

"No, not really."

"And have you had any dreams that repeat as often and with such ferocity?" Snape asked, looking up at Harry's face for the answer.

"Not recently," Harry replied quietly. "This one has had the spot of worst for weeks."

"Now, did you know you were in a dream?"

“Not the first time I had it, but since then, yes.”

“And did you know you had taken a Dreamless Sleep Potion that night during the dream?”

“Yes, I tried to wake myself up.”

“I take it that that didn’t work.”

“No.”

“Very unfortunate,” Snape answered in a monotone.

“Don’t be rude, Snape,” Thia said bitterly.

“He’s not, Thia,” Harry told his friend, “so back down.”

“I’m not,” Snape responded in his own defense. “I have had my own share of problems with this potion and know that feeling well. It is very unfortunate.” He turned from Thia to Harry. “When did you take it?”

“It was about 9:40,” Harry said after a little thought.

“And when did you wake up?”

“I think it was like 5:20. But I’m not sure.”

“That would be 7 hours and 40 minutes, correct?” Snape asked. Madam Pomfrey nodded. They waited patiently as Snape read through his notes. “Well, Mr. Potter, I’d say you could try it again, but I’m not promising anything.” Harry nodded in understanding. “Though, I would suggest you have someone try and wake you five hours after you take it. If it’s working properly, you’ll barely regain consciousness and then fall back to sleep. If it’s working improperly, you’ll regain full consciousness and that’s better than dreaming the whole night.”

“Alright,” Harry said thankfully. “And if it doesn’t work what do we do?”

"There's a stronger dose," Snape answered carefully. "But it's highly addictive and extremely strong, so I would recommend not using it except when you absolutely have to."

"Alright," Harry said again. "Thank you."

"Would you like a dose for the night?" Madame Pomfrey asked gently.

"I think so," Harry said wearily. She stood and started rummaging through her cupboards.

"And why that tone of voice, Harry?" Professor McGonagall, asked the worry evident in her voice.

"There hasn't been a Revelry since last Friday, so I'm expecting it," Harry answered. "Either tonight or tomorrow night."

"I'd say tonight," Snape agreed with him. Madam Pomfrey handed the vial filled with the potion to Harry.

"There you go, dear," she said with a smile. "Play well tomorrow and don't end up in here."

"I'll try not, Madam Pomfrey. Goodnight, everyone." He stood and he and Ginny left the office.

"Why didn't you tell me about this meeting?" Ginny asked before they were even five feet from the office door.

"I didn't want to worry you," Harry answered. "I should have though. I'm sorry. How'd you find out?"

"Thia, and don't you dare change the subject," Ginny said angrily. "I was already worried for you, luv, so don't get all high and mighty with me."

"I'm sorry," Harry repeated once again.

"Of course you are, luv," Ginny said lovingly, "but you have to stop trying to protect..."

The door to the infirmary shut and the adults (minus Severus) exchanged smiles. "Poor boy," Minerva said softly. "I don't know what possessed him to date a Weasley."

"So, what do you think, Severus?" Albus asked the man who was pouring over his notes.

"I'd be more sure of what to tell you if I knew the dream," Severus responded. "But going on what he told me, I'd say he'll be fine."

"What potion were you talking about?" Thia asked him.

"A potion I created once I found the Dreamless inadequate," Snape answered. "I'd rather not give it to him though. It's very dangerous."

"Why did you tell him about it then?" Thia asked curiously.

"If he wants to take it, then I'll give it to him," Snape answered. "I'll give him the choice, but not until we exhaust every other option first."

"How did Miss Weasley find out about this?" Albus asked the room in general, but he knew Thia had something to do with it.

"I told her, sir," Thia answered. "I thought she deserved to know about it and that Harry should have her here."

"I'm not angry with you at all, Thia, because I completely agree," he said, the twinkle bright in his eye. "And I believe Harry's in for an earful from dear Miss Weasley. How are Harry's grades?" he asked turning to Minerva.

"Better," she answered. "Though not what they were before Christmas, they are better than I expected after that vision he had on the sixth."

Albus nodded. "And what do his trainers think?"

"I've explained it to them," Thia answered. "They understand that events deserve second considerations and they've seen how

miserable he was last month. Bryant was actually pleased with his progress. I believe Harry threw himself into the physical activity to burn off his anger. I know his dad used to do that. Keene said he could only give Harry another week, though. If Harry doesn't improve by then Keene's going to leave. Althea says she'll give him until the end of the month."

"That is generous of them," Albus said rubbing his fingers at his temples. "Hopefully the four will realize how much stronger they are together than apart. Harry will not be able to accomplish his goal without their help."

"...Don't you ever keep something like that from me again," Ginny told her boyfriend angrily. Harry nodded, completely scolded. He realized that they were at the Fat Lady's portrait already.

"Come with me," he said grabbing her arm. He led her back around the corner. "Hey, Gin, how about I take you on a date tomorrow night?" he asked her, catching her by surprise. "That is, as long as we aren't still playing."

"I'd love to, Harry," she said happily. He kissed her and started to lead her back to the common room. "Harry, wait." She pressed the Journal into his hands. "Don't forget to read this tonight before you take the potion. And why don't you ask Neville, Dean, or Seamus to wake you up. That way Ron can get a full night's rest before the match tomorrow night."

"I will do as you command, my lady," Harry said with a huge smile on his face. She hit him softly, but kissed the tip of his nose.

"C'mon, they'll be waiting for us."

Dear Luv!

You know... when I say or read, "I'm glad you took those tests" I think I'm talking to some old codger who's on the downhill path to death... sorry... but that's what I think... not that you're old, a codger, or dying, but hey, that's what I think of.

I forgive you for Valentine's Day. I'm just glad I was able to spend it with you and not someone else. Especially any other guy. I had a great time with you, even if you were asleep the whole time. I just wish you had fallen completely asleep so that I could have put make-up on your face! Have I ever told you the time I did that to the twins and had everyone pretend nothing was wrong? I need to tell you that story; it was great!

Harry, I want you to get this through your head right now, okay? I AM NOT GOING TO LEAVE YOU! Not voluntarily, at least, and it'll be a heck of a fight. Neither will Ron or Hermione. So stop playing high and mighty, alright? Just tell them how much you appreciate their help and support. They'll get the drift. I promise. But I ain't telling them for you, so don't even consider it!

I wonder where Thia located that beach. She won't tell me anything about it. I'm getting so excited about the wedding! I hope they don't run off and elope. That would be a huge let down!

Thanks for letting us know about that dream. I know Ron and Hermione appreciated being let in. You should tell them a bit more. Ron's a bit jealous that you've stopped talking to him about stuff and I told him that for the past month and a half he's been out for your head, so of course you stopped talking to him. He got a little defensive, but then he said it had started way back during summer break. Just a thought.

And my last thought for this letter (but no promises) is quite simple. YOU ARE IN NO WAY, SHAPE, OR FORM BURDENING ME BY TELLING ME WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND! Get that through your thick skull!

Love,

Ginny

Harry smiled as he shut the book and cleared it. Ginny sure had a way with words. It was the perfect ending for a not so perfect day.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Easter Holidays

I used to think I was strong
Until the day it all went wrong
I think I need a miracle to it through.
Simple Plan: Perfect World

The Dreamless Sleep Potion did work better, except it did let one dream through. Harry could put up with just one showing of the death parade as long as that was it. It occurred sometime after Neville woke him at about 2 AM and after that Harry slept blissfully.

The game against Hufflepuff was a pushover. After the first ten minutes the score was already 70-0 and Harry had spotted the snitch twice. The first time Harry saw the snitch, one of the Hufflepuff beaters hit a bludger at him and Harry lost sight of the small gold ball. The second time Harry knew he had it, but Summerby, the Hufflepuff seeker, knew that Harry had it as well. Summerby shot at Harry and caused Harry to swerve to avoid contact. But the third time was the charm. He caught it fifteen minutes after the start of the game. The final score was 250-10.

Harry's date with Ginny was a 'proper' Valentine's date. He had the Room of Requirement decorated in a way that resembled Madame Puddifoot's café almost exactly. There were pink and purple hearts everywhere and pink confetti falling from the ceiling. Romantic music was playing in the background. They had a good time joking about the surroundings (which they hated, because neither liked pink) and about Harry's luck with Valentine dates. Harry kissed her goodnight and went to bed.

It was Harry's luck that the Revelry was that night instead of the normal Friday night. It started soon after he fell asleep. He spent a sleepless night turning and tossing, trying to dispel the pictures from his mind's eye.

He let Thia and Snape know about the potion's failure during his classes with each the next Monday. Snape gave Harry an odd look and told him not to take the Potion again. Thia told him to do as Snape advised.

The next week, though, was the best week Harry had had since Christmas break. There was little homework, so Harry concentrated on bringing his grades up. He worked especially hard in Keene's and Althea's classes. He was glad they were giving him a second chance.

The D.A. members forgave Harry for his outburst and asked for his forgiveness in return. Harry was flabbergasted, but gave them the forgiveness anyway. The members were improving by leaps and bounds. At the least, every member shared a room with someone who had lost a family member to the war. Many had experienced the grief first hand and wanted to fight for revenge.

"Shhh!" Harry hissed at the giggling Hermione and Ginny. Ginny's face became instantly calm, but Hermione wasn't so good at hiding her amusement. "You'll wake him up," Harry scolded her. Ginny clapped a hand over Hermione's mouth as the giggling got louder. Harry motioned to the other two to put down the huge bucket they were carrying before they spilt the contents. Harry pulled back the bed curtains to Ron's bed and smiled at his sleeping friend.

"On three then," Ginny whispered as they picked the bucket back up. "One, two, three."

"What the bloody—" Ron shouted, sitting bolt upright. The rest of his sentence was lost as Hermione gave him a good morning kiss.

"Happy birthday, Ron," Harry and Ginny chorused together, playfully turning their backs to the kissing couple.

"Is that Ron shouting obscenities?" Neville asked Harry. Harry nodded and explained why. "Happy birthday," Neville called across the room to the boy who was now finished greeting his girlfriend. Ron nodded in acknowledgement. "You're legal now, right?"

"Yeah," Ron answered grumpily. "You'd think they'd let me sleep in on this special birthday. But they didn't. So, I'm soaked, awake at an ungodly hour, and starving."

"Maybe if you stop complaining long enough for me to talk," Hermione rebuked Ron, "you'll find out that Dobby made you a huge breakfast and it's waiting for you in the Room of Requirement. If you're too late, I'll invite the first years to eat it and you'll get none of it."

"You wouldn't," Ron asked, horrified. "Those pip squeaks can tuck in."

"I wouldn't."

"Ron can't get ready until you leave," Harry told Hermione with a huge grin, for Ron's face had lit up with expectation for his feast.

"The way to Ron's heart is through his stomach," Hermione told Ginny in a stage whisper as they walked to the door.

"That it is," Ginny replied. "That it is." The door closed with its normal squeak. Harry turned to Ron.

"Happy birthday, mate," Harry offered him. "You'll be able to use magic the entire summer holiday." A grin spread over Ron's face that reminded Harry of the twins.

"They won't know what hit them," Ron promised Harry. Somehow Harry knew the twins were the 'they' he was talking about.

The four were back in the common room later that Sunday evening. Ron had eaten surprising amounts of food. At one point, Harry had thought they'd run out of food, but Dobby kept the food coming. After the feast, they went for a walk along the beach and then to the Great Hall for lunch. (Ron had said he was starving and seeing that it was his birthday, they didn't complain.) They spent the afternoon outside. Harry let Ron and Hermione disappear around a bend along the lake. But at the moment, Harry was battling for life in the common room.

"Could you let me win once?" Harry complained for the umpteenth time.

"No," Ron replied, his competitive streak coming out in full force. He had most of Harry's white pieces captured and was closing in for the kill. Harry hadn't been able to capture any of Ron's pieces, so it

wasn't going to be all that hard. "Take that!" Ron said as he captured the last non-king piece Harry had.

"What the bloody hell!" Ron shouted as his pieces started to attack him. The queen jumped onto his shoulder and started to prick at him with her sword. Half of the pawns drew both of their swords and started to attack his right hand. The other half started to hack at his left wrist. "Get off, you little buggers," Ron screamed at them as one of the Castles started to shove itself into his ear.

Harry roared with laughter as his and Ginny's prank came to fulfillment. Ginny might have promised her mum not to get back at Ron while she was angry, but Ginny wasn't angry any longer. They still wanted to get back at Ron, and this seemed like the best way to do it. It had taken some planning, but they had spent study time looking for the charm that would make this work.

"Potter, get these things off of me!" Ron screamed at the laughing boy.

"I didn't charm those things," Harry managed to get out. The whole common room was now laughing as the bishop started to shove itself up Ron's nose.

"Get out of there!" Ron shouted, trying to pull it free. "Hermione, will you help!"

"I'm not sure if I can," Hermione told him sweetly. It was only through her help that they had even found the right book. Hermione had been just as angry at Ron for his stubbornness as Ginny and Harry had been. Ron finally caught sight of the only person with a straight face.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley! Get them off of me!" Ginny surveyed him with cool indifference. "Ginny! Now!" Ron grabbed a handful of the pawns and tried to throw them into the fire. They went about two feet and then boomeranged right back at Ron. He let out a roar of frustration that only caused the room to laugh harder.

Finally feeling sorry for his friend, Harry ended the charm and then helped Ron pick the stray pieces up. "You got to admit, that was a good one," Harry said to Ron as a peace offering.

"Yeah, it was okay," Ron said grudgingly. The room settled down slowly as people remembered that the next day was Monday and that meant classes. Harry sat with Ron, Hermione, and Ginny just chatting about nothing in particular. It was rather soothing and when they headed to bed, they were the last people in the common room.

And so March came to be. It was a calm month after that, weather wise, but only in regards to that. For Ginny, the O.W.L.'s were fast approaching. The war was increasing in ferocity and at least once a week a pitch-black owl visited the school. The owl dropped off the hated letter to yet another student. Though the death parade was no longer bothering him much, there were enough Revelries to fill Harry's weeks in with new nightmares.

His trainers were impressed with how much Harry learnt that month. He was focused and willing to work. He didn't complain. Althea let him know that he'd never be a professional healer, but he was doing remarkably well, nonetheless. Keene was teaching him several new spells a week, and Harry was surprised that he remembered them all when they reviewed. As for Bryant...Well, he didn't say much. But Harry could now successfully defend against Bryant's sword attacks. He hadn't come very close to hitting Bryant, but Harry knew that would come with time.

Thia, Tonks, and Remus were fun to learn from. The three had started dueling each other so that Harry could learn new techniques. He was also coming closer to beating Tonks at duels, but he had a long way to go before he would be able to beat Remus or Thia.

There was only one event of note to mention that happened in March. It included Malfoy, so it couldn't possibly be good. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were returning from a detention with Snape. The reason they got it wasn't important, but it included a prank, the Ravenclaws in their potions class, and a lot of whipped cream.

They were talking quietly, Ron complaining about Snape, Hermione telling him off, and Harry laughing at the two. Everyone once in a while Harry added a comment just to set Ron off again. That only got Hermione angrier. Turning the last corner before the stairs, they ran right into Malfoy sweeping down into the dungeons.

“Where were you?” Hermione asked the disgruntled teen. Harry watched him stuff something into his robe’s pocket.

“Where I was is none of your business, Granger,” Malfoy sneered back at her.

“Actually it is,” Hermione replied. “It’s past curfew, so unless you’re on official Prefect business or have a note from a teacher, you are supposed to be in your common room.”

“What about you?” Malfoy asked her insolently.

“We have a note from Professor Snape,” Harry replied. “We were serving our detention. Are you out of your common room without permission, Malfoy?”

“So what if I am, Potter?” Malfoy countered.

“I’ll be more than willing to take those points from you,” Ron informed him. Malfoy looked down his nose at Ron and Harry knew whatever was coming wasn’t good.

“Take the points from me if you must, Weasel,” Malfoy snapped. “At least I don’t have a Mudblood growing out from my side.” Harry grabbed the back of Ron’s robes while Hermione turned to face the Slytherin.

“Call us names if you must, Malfoy,” Hermione told him, adding as much disdain as she could into her voice. “I think it’s rather immature of you and an easy way to seem like the huge idiot you are.”

“Why you—” Malfoy said, starting forward with his wand raised and pointed directly at Hermione’s heart. Harry let go of Ron and took out

his own wand and pointed it at the boy. Harry hadn't forgotten for one bit that he was dealing with a Death Eater.

"What do we have here?" Professor Snape's oily voice interrupted the brewing fight. "I believe I told you three to return to your common room a while ago." Harry nodded and turned his back to Malfoy. A curse whizzed past his ear, and Harry remembered another time when the fake Moody had yelled at him for turning his back to Malfoy.

"Mr. Malfoy, hand me that wand this instant," Snape commanded the boy. Harry turned and was surprised to see Malfoy hand it over. "Do you have permission to be out and about, Mr. Malfoy?"

"No, sir," Malfoy muttered.

"Ten points for that then," Snape said. "For the curse you just threw at Potter, you will serve three detentions and you have lost your house 25 points. Potter, Weasley, and Granger, you should be in your common room soon, if not immediately." Harry nodded and led his two friends away. "How dare do you attack another student, Mr. Malfoy! Come with me to my office and we'll discuss your abysmal behavior." Harry kept his friends walking, and they didn't stop until they were in the common room.

"Did I just hear and see that right?" Ron asked them in awe. "Did Snape really take points from Malfoy for attacking Harry?" Harry nodded.

"I glad we didn't get into any trouble," Harry muttered back. "I can think of better uses of my time then spending it with Snape in detention. Speaking of detentions, how did you enjoy your second one, Hermione?"

"It was wonderful," she replied sarcastically. "I can't think of a better way to spend my evening than with Professor Snape in his office."

"What do you mean by that?" Ron asked.

"I mean that off the top of my head I can think of a billion other things I would rather do then spend time with him," Hermione said, rolling

her eyes. "For example, taking my boyfriend out for a date." Harry shook his head and left the couple to their bickering.

The month finally passed and turned into April, to Harry and Ron's joy. April meant Easter holidays, and Easter holidays meant no school. They were talking about going to the Burrow for the break instead of staying at Hogwarts. Harry had even asked Thia what she thought about the idea. Thia said he should talk to Dumbledore about it. So Harry found his way into Dumbledore's office the evening of April first.

"Well, good afternoon, Harry," Dumbledore said happily. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, sir, I was wondering if it would be possible to go to the Burrow for Easter holidays," Harry finished nervously. Dumbledore's cheery smile had slowly been replaced with a look of seriousness during the question.

"Have Ron and Ginny gotten a letter from their parents?" Dumbledore asked slowly. Harry shook his head. "Why don't you come back tomorrow evening, same time, and we'll talk about it then."

Harry left the office completely confused. He slowly climbed the stairs up to Gryffindor Tower and entered. He walked over to Ron and sat next to Ginny. Ron and Ginny were in the middle of a chess game. Harry could tell that Ginny was winning.

"Have you guys heard from your parents?" Harry asked them. They shook their heads, not looking up from their game.

"Why do you ask, Harry?" Hermione asked from where she sat next to Ron.

He told them about the conversation that he had with Dumbledore. "You should know by now, Harry," Ron said sagely, "that Dumbledore only tells you what he wants you to know." He turned back to the chess game only to watch Ginny checkmate his king.

"Nice job, Gin," Harry said, kissing the top of her head.

"Thanks, want to play me?" she asked sweetly.

"No, I want to play Ron," he replied. "And I want you to sit next to me and give me advice." Ginny laughed and stood up. Harry took her seat and started to set-up his side of the board. Ginny hurried up the stairs and returned carrying a book to study from. "I thought you were going to help me?" Harry appealed to her. She smiled and sat on his lap.

"Only if I can sit here," she whispered in his ear. Harry squirmed, but nodded. "Okay," she said aloud, throwing the book across the room and almost hitting Denis Creevey on the head. "Sorry, Denis!"

Harry proceeded in losing the game in spectacular fashion, though he blamed Ginny for the loss. She kept distracting him and wouldn't give him any advice. "You're evil, Gin," he complained.

"Why, thank you!" she replied brightly. "There's nothing quite like being called evil by one's boyfriend."

Harry stood, spilling Ginny onto the floor. "I'm going to go get ready for the D.A. meeting. Anyone want to help?" All three nodded and followed him out the door and into the hallway. There really wasn't anything to prepare, but Harry liked to arrive early.

The meeting went well, as normal, and Harry was proud of his students. They picked up on the spells he taught them quickly and easily. The dueling practice was getting better, although Harry realized what Thia meant when she said dueling was his thing. He was leaps and bounds ahead of the group, and probably always would be.

After the students left, Harry cornered Thia. "So why would Ron and Ginny hear from their parents lately?" he asked her forcefully.

Thia looked at him guiltily. "Harry, I know you're going to hate this, but I can't tell you. Dumbledore beat you to me. I'm sorry, but he wants to be the one to tell you. He wanted me to inform Ron and Ginny that they should accompany you tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow's a Thursday," Harry said angrily.

"I know, but this is more important," Thia told the angry man. "I'm sorry, Harry, I truly am. But it isn't my place to tell you that." She fled the room.

"She takes promises so seriously," Ron complained.

"We'll have to wait until tomorrow evening," Harry said resigning himself to the wait.

Harry had a lousy Thursday the next day. He almost had his hand eaten by whatever the creature Hagrid had introduced to them that day. He wasn't sure what it was called and didn't care, though he knew Hermione could tell him all about it if he asked.

He spent his healing class in the hospital wing. Harry was surprised at the number of students that walked through those doors in a single class period. He healed a nearly severed off finger (Potions accident). He relocated a dislocated shoulder (A flying accident, poor first year). He cleaned out a nasty looking burn (The student wouldn't say how he got burnt.).

Then, Ginny never showed up for lunch. So he spent it alone, because Ron and Hermione had conveniently disappeared at the same time. He hated eating meals alone. It reminded him of Muggle school before he got accepted into Hogwarts. He had always eaten alone because everyone else was afraid of being beaten up by Dudley and his gang.

After lunch was a Double Potions class, which wouldn't have been so bad, except that he forgot to do his homework for the day. Snape wasn't all that thrilled and gave Harry a detention for it. Harry swallowed the remark he wanted to say, and took the punishment without comment.

And then came Transfiguration. Somehow Professor McGonagall had found out about Harry's detention. After the grueling class, she called Harry to the front and interrogated him about it. By the time she was done, Harry had a huge headache.

He ran to the common room, up the stairs, dumped his stuff and ran to meet the other three by the fire. He didn't want to be late for this meeting with Dumbledore. He had a feeling that it was important.

"Come in," Dumbledore called to them. Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione entered the office to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sitting near the fire. Harry felt his stomach flip when he saw them. They looked like a mess. Mr. Weasley had bags beneath his eyes, and Mrs. Weasley looked as if she had been crying. This couldn't be good.

"So what is the problem with going home for Easter holidays?" Harry asked bluntly. He didn't feel like beating around the bush today. Not after the day he had thus far.

Mrs. Weasley started crying again. Ginny and Hermione went over to comfort her as Mr. Weasley started pacing. Ron stood stock still as if expecting to be hit. Harry stared at Dumbledore, praying that he hadn't guessed right. All of the Weasley's had to be alive.

Mr. Weasley stopped pacing and faced his son and the boy's best friend. Harry watched as the man pulled himself together. "We were visited late last week," Mr. Weasley started haltingly. Harry felt his stomach fall straight to the ground. Surely he would have seen this. "The house is gone. Fred and George are both at St. Mungo's. They're fighting for life, but it was worse for a bit. Bill, thankfully, was away at a friend's and is safe and sound."

"The twins are alright?" Ginny asked frightened. Molly clung to her only daughter as she sobbed into Ginny's shoulder.

"Yes, they'll be fine, baby girl," Mr. Weasley told her gently. "They were the only ones seriously hurt. Though, Shackbolt and Podmore spent a bit of time in there too. In fact, Shackbolt is still there."

"You'll be able to fix the house?" Ron asked nervously. Mrs. Weasley broke into harder sobs. This can't be happening, Harry thought, horrified.

“No,” was all Mr. Weasley was able to say before Ginny joined in with her mother’s weeping. Mr. Weasley hugged his wife, trying to calm her. Harry rushed over to Ginny and took her into his arms. She sobbed into his robes and Harry held her tightly, trying not to cry with her. The twins were at St. Mungo’s fighting for their lives. Shacklebolt was too. There was no Burrow. Could it possibly get worse?

“Why not?” Ron asked stunned. He was staring at his sobbing mother and sister. Hermione walked over to him slowly and took his hand.

“They’ve contaminated the area with Nundu poison,” Dumbledore continued. Hermione let out a small ‘Oh!’ before Dumbledore started once more. “It is a rather dangerous beast, if not the most dangerous, and the creature breathes out an extremely deadly gas. It will take years of natural decontamination before the area will be fit for habitation.” It had gotten a whole lot worse.

“Did anyone get poisoned?” Hermione asked quietly.

“No,” was Dumbledore’s simple answer. Harry felt Ginny stop crying. She was getting angry, and Harry hoped she didn’t say anything she’d regret later.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” she yelled as she pushed away from Harry. Turning to her parents, she continued with her rant. “You were visited late last week! So why didn’t you send a letter saying, ‘Hello dears, just thought to say hi! The house is gone, replaced by a Nundu contaminated wasteland. Your twin brothers are dying in St. Mungo’s, but don’t worry they’ll be fine. Shacklebolt’s there too, keeping them company. Love, Mum and Dad!’” Mrs. Weasley broke down once more, and Mr. Weasley stared at his little girl guiltily. “Don’t you think we des— Harry, stop it!” He had been pulling on her arm.

“Gin, be quiet,” he told her softly.

“No!” she yelled, rounding on him. “I want to know why I wasn’t told! My childhood home is gone! My twin brothers are fighting for life! Shacklebolt got hurt protecting my family and home! And I want to know why we weren’t told!” She turned back to her parents. “Why? Don’t you think that would be worthwhile information for us to know? I

understand when you want to keep things from us like when Harry's going to get away from his relatives! But this! This is our family, too! Harry, stop it!"

"Ginny, come with me, please," Harry whispered in her ear. He forcefully led her out of the office and down the stairs. "Gin, you're a great person and all, but I can't let you yell at your parents like that."

"They should have told us!" Ginny spat at him.

"Yes, they should have," Harry agreed. "But adults forget that us kids have thoughts and feelings too, and try to shield us from the horrors of life. You just have to learn to forgive them."

"They should have told us," Ginny said again, breaking into tears and beating on Harry's chest in frustration. He grabbed her wrists with one of his hands and her chin with the other.

"I know that, Gin," he said softly. "And they know it. But it's too late now, and you're only making the situation worse." She tried to get out of his grip, but he was too strong. "Trust me. I went through this last summer. Just forgive and forget, and start worrying about your brothers. Don't make your parents feel any worse about the situation." She slumped against him, all of her energy leaking out of her.

"I can't believe they're in the hospital," she said quietly. "I never pictured them there. Ron, Bill, Charlie, even Percy, but never the twins. If they were there, it was only to cheer everyone else up. They're so unstoppable."

"They'll be fine, Gin," he whispered into her hair, letting go of her wrists. "They have too much life in them to die now. They'll die at a ripe old age." They stood like that for a bit, and then Ginny led the way up the stairs. They entered the office slowly, and found it much the same as when they left. Mrs. Weasley was still sobbing into Mr. Weasley's shoulder. Ron was now clinging to Hermione. Dumbledore was observing the scene unfold before him, no twinkle evident in his eyes.

Harry nodded at the Headmaster, who nodded back. Ginny walked over to her parents hesitantly. She whispered, "Sorry." She flung herself into her father's arms and cried.

"It's okay, baby girl," Mr. Weasley said, comforting her. Mrs. Weasley joined the hug and her parents' arms now encircled Ginny. Ron walked over and Mr. Weasley made room for the boy. Harry and Hermione stood awkwardly, watching the worried family. Mrs. Weasley entangled herself and motioned for them to join. They hesitated, not sure if they should.

"Come over here," she said, as tears streamed down her face. "You're both family." Harry and Hermione walked over and they stood, gathering strength from one another. Harry just couldn't believe the Burrow was gone forever. He knew the twins would recover, but the Burrow was gone. But what if the twins didn't. They will, Harry said, stopping the previous thought. They must!

After some time, Dumbledore cleared his throat. The group broke apart. Harry held onto Ginny, letting her lean into him. She seemed so vulnerable at the moment. He didn't want her to be crying. He wanted her to smile.

"I believe that you will want to visit your brothers over the break next week?" Dumbledore asked politely. Ginny and Ron nodded. "Very well, all four of you may go to Grimmauld for the break. Harry, need I remind you about being careful?"

"What does it matter?" Harry asked with a slight smile. "Trouble almost always finds me, even when I'm running in the opposite direction." Ron laughed and Hermione and Ginny smiled. The adults, however, exchanged worried looks. "Give me a break!" Harry exclaimed to them.

"Very well," Dumbledore said with a nod. "Keep your plans to yourselves. The fewer who know about this, the better. You four had better head to your common room. Curfew starts soon." Harry nodded and led his friends from the room. However, he did not lead them to the common room, but to the Room of Requirement.

They spent many hours talking about what they had found out. Ginny was very outspoken about the events, but Ron was unusually quiet. Harry exchanged a quick worried glance with Hermione. Neither Ron nor Ginny were acting as they normally would. They decided to head back to the dorms when Hermione fell asleep.

The train ride back to London was quiet. No one spoke, and both Weasleys looked worn and strained. They hadn't heard from their parents since Thursday, and it was now Sunday. The train arrived in London in the early afternoon. Bill, Melissa, who had become an Order member, Remus, Tonks, and Thia met them there.

They left the platform quietly, and walked the many blocks to number 12 Grimmauld Place. Harry was not happy with the prospect of staying there, but he knew Ginny needed him. Not to mention he also wanted to see the twins. He would just have to suck it up and deal with the memories the house invoked.

Mrs. Weasley looked horrible when she opened the door to the house. She had red eyes and her face was pale and drawn. Ginny clung to her mother, and the two cried silently. Bill and Remus led the group down to the kitchen. Mr. Weasley was sitting at the table with Charlie and Shacklebolt. Mrs. Weasley started setting platters of food on the table, and the teens helped set it.

"Hello, everyone," Shacklebolt said tiredly. The group returned the greeting.

"When did you get out of St. Mungo's?" Harry asked.

"Yesterday evening," Shacklebolt answered.

Strained silence fell on the room. Harry couldn't think of anything to talk about that wasn't too frivolous or too close to talking about the twins. They ate in silence. Soon they were done, and the group set out for St. Mungo's. On the way, Tonks and Thia explained that the twins had taken another turn for the worse and they might not be able to see George or Fred that day.

"What do you mean, turn for the worse?" Ginny snapped.

"There was a poison in their system that was missed in the original diagnosis," Thia answered, ignoring Ginny's tone of voice. "The healers are desperately trying to combat it. But first they have to figure out what it is."

They reached the huge shop windows that served as the entrance to St. Mungo's. Mr. Weasley went to stand in line to talk to the witch at the desk. He came back with a sorrowful look on his face.

"We can't see them," he told the group. "The healers are working on the poison, and no one else is allowed in. Though," he said turning to his wife, "the head healer, Healer Lemon, wants to talk to us." The two left, and those remaining turned to look at each other.

"Now what do we do?" Ginny asked the adults.

"We wait," Remus answered. "How is the school work coming?"

"Just fine, Remus," Harry answered quickly. "Let's not talk now." Remus nodded. Remus led them over to a few open seats and let Tonks sit in a chair. Harry sat on another and pulled Ginny onto his lap, ignoring Bill's glare and Charlie's grunt of disapproval. Ron and Hermione sat side by side on one chair. They waited in silence, Harry knowing that Ginny was close to tears.

Mr. Weasley entered the waiting room, guiding a silently sobbing Mrs. Weasley. He shook his head to the questions and led the way out of the hospital. They walked slowly back to Grimmauld. They went into the library and everyone took seats either on the couches and chairs or on the floor itself. Harry leaned up against the wall and Ginny sat next to him.

Mr. Weasley looked over his family. How would he be able to tell them what Healer Lemon had said? There was his eldest son, holding his girlfriend. He was proud of his first-born son. Bill was a fine young man. Charlie sat on one of the armchairs, glaring angrily at Harry and Ginny. Charlie's anger had only intensified while he was away in Romania. Arthur was glad that Charlie had been able to take off from work to be with his brothers. Ron and Hermione shared

another armchair. Ron looked awful. He had developed a strong bond with the twins, even if he was often the butt of their jokes.

Then there was his baby girl. She was furious under all those tears. She had started crying soon after she sat down. The twins were her favorite brothers, though she was closest with Ron. The young woman that his baby girl had grown into was confused, angry, and hurt. He was glad she had Harry.

And then there was Harry. Harry was as good as a son to him. The way Harry treated his baby girl, made Arthur sure that Harry was the right man for Ginny. Harry was resting his chin on Ginny's head and he whispered soft words into her hair. His eyes were guarded, and Arthur knew he was just as worried as the rest.

"Dad," Bill started softly, "what did the healer say?" Arthur rushed to Molly the second her first sob left her mouth. He held her tightly and looked over his children. The only one missing was Percy, as he was still in Azkaban.

"They're not sure the twins will live," he finally answered his son. It broke his heart saying that and seeing it seep into their understanding. "They can't figure out the poison in George and Fred's bodies, and without that knowledge they can't give them an antidote."

"They have to live!" Ginny shouted, but not at him. "They just have to! They can't die!" Her voice broke and she started weeping again. Arthur felt his heart break as he watched his only daughter face the possible loss of her brothers.

"I think it would be a good idea for everyone to head to bed," Thia finally said. "What good will it do the twins if we kill ourselves with lack of sleep?" She and Remus herded the group out and into their individual rooms. Arthur was thankful for such great friends.

"Harry," Ron said quietly, an hour later.

"Yeah, Ron?" Harry answered quietly.

"I can't sleep."

“Neither can I, Ron,” Harry responded throwing the covers aside. “Let’s go check on the girls.” Ron nodded and they silently walked across the hallway and knocked on Ginny and Hermione’s door. There was a quiet yelp that Harry recognized as Ginny, and then Hermione’s voice told them to enter.

“What do you guys want?” Ginny asked angrily.

“We can’t sleep,” Ron said in a pitiful whine.

“Can we just talk or something?” Harry pleaded with Ginny.

“Fine,” she answered. Harry sat on the end of her bed. They talked quietly of the twins and what they had gotten up to. It was impossible not to smile and laugh.

“Did they ever send your mum a toilet seat?” Harry asked with a laugh.

“Yeah, for Christmas our first year,” Ron said smiling. “Mum sent it back with a Howler. Didn’t you hear it?”

“No,” Harry replied. “I never did. They did send me a toilet seat after the fight for the Philosopher’s Stone. I guess Madame Pomfrey confiscated it though.”

“That’s too bad,” Ginny said with a laugh. “I wonder how the shop is.”

“Lee must be keeping it open,” Hermione replied. “I can’t see the shop being closed just because they’re in St. Mungo’s.”

“I don’t want them to die,” Ginny whispered several minutes later.

“Me neither,” Ron breathed softly.

“It would be so boring without them,” Hermione added firmly.

“They won’t die,” Harry said strongly. “They love life too much to die.” The sun was rising and filling the room with its light. Soon they heard

the house awaking. Mrs. Weasley's footsteps were going down the stairs; she was probably going to make breakfast. Remus and Thia's voices went past talking in soft and hurried tones.

"I guess we should head back to our room," Harry said standing. Ginny gave him a hug and then he headed back to their room. He and Ron quickly dressed and then headed down to the kitchen as well.

Bill and Arthur entered the room, both looking exhausted. "Did you get to see...?" Mrs. Weasley started, but she trailed off when Mr. Weasley shook his head. She nodded and brushed fiercely at the falling tears. She finished placing the food on the table and everyone started to eat. Harry forced himself to chew each bite and then swallow the food. It wasn't easy; he didn't feel all that hungry.

The day passed slowly. Bill, Mr. Weasley, and Tonks had to work. Remus and Thia were gone on some Order business. Mrs. Weasley was furiously cleaning the house. Harry spent the day with his friends, but they were worried and couldn't find anything to occupy themselves.

When Arthur returned, he had news from St. Mungo's. It seemed that they had figured out the poison and were now treating them. Harry smiled with the other Weasleys when he heard that news. The twins weren't out of the woods but they were going to live.

That night Harry slept fitfully. His normal dreams were punctuated with dreams of the twins dying or already dead. And the memories of Sirius made a strange nightmare for him. He woke up from the last dream of Sirius and knew he wouldn't be able to sleep for the rest of the night. He got out of bed and put on some running clothes. He wouldn't be able to run, but he wanted to work through some hand to hand exercises that Bryant had taught him.

He spent three hours running through his exercises. He had cleared the furniture to the edges of the library's walls and was using the empty space. He was going through the most complex sword dance he knew, when he realized someone was watching. He grounded the

stick-sword he had transfigured from a quill and turned to the door. Thia and Remus were watching him.

“Keep going,” Thia said, impressed. “Don’t let us interrupt you.” Harry nodded and started over, picking up speed as he continued. He loved the fluid movements of this dance. And a dance it was. He swept the sword to the left and right, turning around at some points and dropping to the ground at other times. With one last flourish, the dance was done. Harry grounded the impromptu sword and turned back to the two adults.

“You’ve only been learning sword for three months, right?” Remus asked amazed. Harry nodded. “You’re a natural then, Harry.”

“I was wondering if you wanted to run with us,” Thia asked.

“Sure. Can you help me move the furniture back?” They nodded, and in no time at all the furniture was back the way it was before. Harry enjoyed the run with Thia and Remus, though his muscles were protesting the long workout. By the time they got back, Harry was forcing his feet to go one in front of the other and Thia and Remus were standing at his sides, making sure he didn’t fall over.

Molly was frantic when she saw him. She was positive that they had been attacked. When they started laughing, she got offended. “Well, you look horrible!” she responded defensively.

“Don’t worry, Molly,” Remus said calming his laughter. “Harry just learnt a very valuable lesson.”

“And what’s that?” Ron asked from the table, after swallowing the large amount of food in his mouth.

“Not to go running after a three hour long intense work out,” Harry replied, sinking thankfully into a chair. He immediately pulled the nearest food towards himself and dished up large helpings. “No wait, I have a correction. Don’t go for an hour and a half run after a three hour work out.”

“Well, I could have told you that!” Thia said with a laugh.

"Then why didn't you?" Harry asked after swallowing his food. He was famished.

"Because I didn't know that you had been working out for three hours," she answered. "Though you did pretty good for a while." The two were laughing, and Harry made a rude noise in his throat. This caused them to laugh even harder. They fell silent as Mr. Weasley entered the room. He sat at the table and started to dish food onto his plate. Everyone knew that he went to St. Mungo's early every morning.

"Any news?" Mrs. Weasley asked standing right behind him. He shook his head, not looking up from his plate. "Well, no news is good news." The room stayed silent and Harry was glad when he was able to excuse himself to go take a shower. He limped his way up the stairs and then back down them fifteen minutes later. He eased his way into the library where Ginny was studying and Hermione was working on homework. He sank into the chair across from Ginny, and he pulled the book she was pretending to read away from her.

"Hey! I was reading that!" she complained.

"Yes, and that's Ron doing homework behind you," Harry replied with a smile. "Why are you studying Defense without me? I'd be more than willing to help."

"It was the first book I grabbed," Ginny told him. "And you're right, I'm not studying. I'm too worried about Fred and George to concentrate."

"Well, then, let's see if I can help." He opened the book randomly and asked Ginny questions from that page. They spent the morning reviewing Defense, and Harry was glad to distract Ginny from the worry.

"Have any of you guys seen Ron?" Thia asked late that afternoon.

"No, not since breakfast," Harry answered slowly. The others said similar things.

"Well, Molly is going insane with worry," she informed them. "Can you help look for him?" They nodded and stood up. They couldn't find Ron anywhere in the house. Harry and Ginny checked the attic where Buckbeak lived. They checked each of the bedrooms, stopping to wonder at how messy Bill's room was already. They searched the ground floor rooms and then the kitchen. Hermione and Thia were coming up from the basement without Ron.

"Where could that git get to?" Ginny asked irritated.

"Where's Molly?" Thia asked worried.

"In the front room," Harry answered. "She's crying mighty hard." Thia nodded and headed to that room. The three teens stood looking at one another.

"Where could he be?" Hermione asked.

"I don't know, but when I get my hands on him," Ginny said making a violent gesture in the air. "He's giving mum the worries." They headed up to Ron and Harry's room, hoping that he'd be in there. He wasn't.

"Let's check the rooms again," Hermione said, trying to hide her worry. Harry nodded and they searched the bedrooms once again, working up to the top of the house. They stopped in the attic and stayed in there to pet Buckbeak.

"He wouldn't leave the house, would he?" Ginny asked nervously.

"No," Harry answered, but he didn't believe it.

"This is just what mum needed," she said fiercely. "The Git in Azkaban, her twins in St. Mungo's, and ikkle Ronniekins missing."

"I know," Harry agreed. "She didn't look to good when we last saw her."

"I wonder why he didn't leave a note?" Hermione asked herself out loud.

"Yeah," Ginny answered. "You would think he would."

"What was that?" Harry asked, stepping in front of the girls. He drew his wand but sighed in relief as Ron slipped through the window. "Where have you been, mate?" he asked, relieved.

"On the roof," he answered with a shrug.

"Well, you had better go find mum," Ginny scolded him. "She's worked herself in a right good worry fit because of you." Ron gulped but left the attic for the stairs. Harry grabbed Ginny's hand and led her down after Ron, with Hermione following. Mrs. Weasley was beside herself with joy and hugged Ron until he turned blue. Thia pried her off and sat Ron down. He explained where he had been and then Mrs. Weasley yelled at him for a good fifteen minutes. Harry and Ginny left, hiding grins, but Hermione stayed to give support to her boyfriend.

Mr. Weasley came home later that evening, pale and drawn. The room, filled with loud eating people, became instantly silent. They waited for the news he had brought from St. Mungo's. Harry had a feeling that it couldn't be good. Mr. Weasley walked over to his wife and whispered something in her ear. She looked up, surprised and then followed him out of the room. The remaining occupants exchanged worried looks and jumped when they heard Mrs. Weasley's sobs from the other side of the kitchen door.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley re-entered the kitchen and Mr. Weasley cleared his throat. "Healer Lemon informed me that the twins had an undesirable reaction to the antidote. The healers are afraid that either they are allergic to an ingredient or they mis-diagnosed the poison. He didn't think they'd survive the night. He actually said that the twins needed a miracle to survive the night."

Chapter Thirty-Six: Secret Keeper

When you are with me
I'm free.. I'm careless... I believe...
Above all others we will fly.
Creed: My Sacrifice

"They could die!" Ginny cried out in disbelief. "I thought they would be fine!"

"So did Healer Lemon," Mr. Weasley answered her. "They didn't count on this." Harry shook himself out of his stunned state. He took one glance at Ginny and took her hand under the table. She squeezed it back. "They've offered to allow three people at a time to keep vigil in the room. I think we should take turns. Your mum and I along with Charlie will go first."

Charlie stood up and went to get his and Mrs. Weasley's cloaks. The three left soon after Mr. Weasley had first arrived. The room's occupants exchanged looks and started clearing the table. No one was hungry anymore.

"We should pick who goes next," Bill finally said.

"It should be Ron, Ginny, and you," Remus said in a strong voice.

"I'm not going without Harry," Ginny said wrapping an arm around his waist. Bill gave Harry an evil glare, but nodded.

"Alright, then, Ginny, Harry, and I'll go next," Bill said tersely.

"Why do I have to go with you?" Ginny asked angrily. "Do you think Harry's going to shag me right next to my dying brothers?" Harry felt his cheeks burn red and noticed that just about everyone else was surprised and embarrassed. Bill's ears were a bright red and Ron was choking on the water he'd just swallowed. "Give it a rest, Bill. Harry and I will go with Remus or Tonks or someone else, but you are not going to baby sit us."

Bill stared at her, but Ginny wasn't backing down. Finally, he looked away and sighed. "Alright, then Ron and Hermione will come with me and Remus can go with Ginny and Harry. Harry will need a few more guards, but we can worry about that later."

And so the waiting began. It was worse than when Mr. Weasley had been at St. Mungo's last year. This time, it was the twins who could die. Harry, like Ginny, had never thought about the twins dying, it didn't seem possible.

It didn't seem possible that Sirius could die, an evil voice in his head argued. Yet he is dead. All because of you. You are a danger to everyone around you.

After about thirty minutes of waiting, Harry was about ready to scream. He hated this house so much. It brought back so many memories that hurt. He needed to get out of it. But there was no way he'd be allowed to. Unless...

"Ron," Harry said so that only Ron, Hermione, and Ginny heard him. "How'd you get on to the roof?"

"Why?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"So that I can jump," Harry replied sarcastically. "Come on, Hermione, do you really think I'd do something that stupid? I just need out of this house for a bit."

"Follow me," Ron said shooting Hermione a warning look. They followed Ron up the stairs to the attic. Ron climbed out of the window and onto a ledge. It was almost a foot wide. From there it was three feet up onto the ledge above the window. That was much thinner, but the roof was only a foot or two above that. Harry felt a rush as he balanced on the ledge and knew that he belonged in the air. Ginny was next, and she had no problems with the ledges. Hermione was a different matter. She needed quite a bit of coaxing and help from the other three, but she was finally up there with them.

They stayed on the roof for a long while, thinking their own thoughts. Harry was laying down staring at the hundreds of stars in the sky. He

was thankful to be out of the house. He could pretend that he was on top of a tower at Hogwarts and not at Grimmauld. An hour passed and then another. "Ron, it's about time for us to leave," Hermione said from where she sat across from him. Ron nodded and then descended into the attic. Hermione had a little problem getting down, but soon she was safely in the house as well.

"I don't want to go," Harry whispered to Ginny. Ginny heard the plea in his voice and nodded in understanding. She got up from where she had been sitting next to Hermione and lay next to Harry.

"Are you okay, luv?" she asked him softly.

"Not really," he answered her honestly. "It's this house. I can't stand it. I can't stop thinking about all the time we spent here with Sirius. The pranks George and Fred played on him and the pranks he played on them."

Ginny nodded and turned her body to look at him. She propped her head on an arm and ran her other hand through his hair. Harry closed his eyes, concentrating on her fingers. "I'm with you on that, luv. I can't stop thinking about that Christmas. It was a lot like this, only this is worse." She went back to staring at the stars.

"Are you alright, Gin?" he asked her, concerned. He turned to look at her and was surprised to see tears on her face. He sat up and pulled her into his arms. They sat like that for a long hour. Finally, Ginny stopped crying and just rested in his arms. "Are you alright, Gin?" he asked again.

"They can't die, Harry. They just can't!" she screamed at the night. "I don't know what I'd do without them!" Harry didn't know what to say. He felt the same way and he couldn't tell her that they'd be all right any longer.

"We have to have faith in them, I guess," he answered after a long moment of thought. "I don't want them to die either." Another hour passed and Harry thought that they should head back inside. They maneuvered the outside of the building and made it inside safe and sound.

They entered the library and found Tonks asleep in Remus' arms. He motioned for them to enter and to be quiet. Harry and Ginny sat in the love seat across from them and Ginny snuggled into Harry's arms. She was soon fast asleep. Shortly after that, Charlie entered looking extremely angry.

"Where have you been?" he yelled at Harry. Ginny and Tonks both woke up, groggy. "I have been looking for you both!" Ginny bristled, realizing that Charlie was being over-protective. She opened her mouth, but before she could yell, Harry put a hand over her mouth.

"We were on the roof," Harry answered instead. "We needed—"

"What were you doing on the roof?" Charlie interrupted. "I can't believe you, Potter. Why can't you leave my sister alone?"

"Because I don't want him to, Charlie," Ginny answered calmly, restraining her anger. "We needed out of this house. It's horrible in here. I couldn't stop thinking about Christmas, when dad was in St. Mungo's. We were stuck in here back then too. Why do you have to think about the worst possibility?" Charlie stared at her, surprised. "Just trust us." Charlie left the room without saying anything else. "I'm sorry that he woke you up, Tonks."

"Don't mention it," she said with a trace of a smile on her face. "It's a good day when I see Charlie Weasley speechless." She snuggled back into Remus' shoulder and fell asleep. It was soon time to leave. Tonks, Remus, Charlie, and Mad-Eye Moody were accompanying them to the hospital. They carefully made their way to the hospital, stopping frequently. They made their way to Fred and George's room and waited for their turn to enter.

After a few minutes, Ron, Hermione, and Bill exited the room. Remus offered his spot to Molly, who accepted it gratefully. So, Harry entered the busy room with Ginny and Molly. Several healers were working next to the twins, monitoring them with spells. More healers were working with potions in a corner of the room. Several trainees were running between the two groups with messages. And over seeing it all was an old man. Harry assumed that he was Healer Lemon.

Harry then turned to look at the twins. They looked horrible. Their customary smile was missing from their gaunt and tired faces. They had lost a lot of weight and both were sweating from a fever. A young Healer walked over to them and asked them to sit in the chairs placed against the wall. "Sorry, that they're not closer, but you'd be in the way." Harry nodded and the Healer went back to work.

For the amount of working adults in the room, it was extremely quiet. The healers spoke in practiced hushed tones, so as not to disturb the unconscious patients. It unnerved Harry quite a bit. The twins had never been the attention to such a quiet group. They had always been the center of a group of laughing people.

Two hours passed slowly. The Healers worked with measured actions and careful patience. Harry held onto Ginny who was near tears. Mrs. Weasley, on her other side, was crying silently. It didn't seem real, somehow. Fred and George were lying right in front of him, dying, yet it didn't seem real. This can't be happening! he cried out silently.

And then the atmosphere changed; from one of efficient worry to one of mounting panic. Harry realized that the twins were leaving. They had stopped... Or hadn't made it to the water that is life. He remembered the fall that had brought him life before Christmas. He was glad he had hit water, but it seemed that the twins hadn't.

Healer Lemon walked to the door and called in the rest of the family. Mrs. Weasley stood up and walked into Mr. Weasley's open arms. Harry and Ginny stood as well.

"They're slipping fast," Healer Lemon started in a raspy hushed voice. "After I'm done talking I'll allow you to say your goodbyes. However, there is one more option we could take. It is truly a last ditch effort though. It will either heal them or kill them. I've consulted with a Poison Expert who specializes in Death Eater poisons and between the two of us we think we've figured out what the poison is. The antidote though contains high levels of ingredients that will kill them if we're wrong. If we are right, it will counteract the ingredients already in their system and they will be on the road to recovery. And it would

explain the reaction they had to the other potion we gave them.” He gave them a few seconds to think about it. “The sooner they’re given the antidote, the better.”

“You are sure they are dying?” Mrs. Weasley asked. He nodded. The Weasley parents exchanged a look and both nodded. “Please give it to them.”

“Would you like a chance to say goodbye?” Lemon asked.

“If time is of the essence, please, give it to them,” Mr. Weasley answered strongly.

“Then I’m going to ask you all to leave,” he instructed them. “If we are right, the reaction between the antidote and poison is not pretty.” Healer Lemon herded them out of the room, turned, and shut the door behind him. The Weasleys clung to each other: some in hugs, others just by hands. Time seemed to slow. A minute seemed like an eternity.

Several eternities later, several gut-wrenching screams were heard through the door. Harry remembered a potion he had read in Snape’s notebook. It was one of the last ones, but if that was the poison and they had given the twins the antidote, then those screams were for the best. However, the Weasley’s didn’t know that and he didn’t want to give them false hope.

Several more eternities later, Healer Lemon exited the room, a thankful smile on his face. “They’re over that hurdle.” The Weasley brothers (including Harry) let out a huge whoop! and the girls started crying tears of joy. “But they have weeks of recovery ahead of them. But, like I said, they are over that hurdle.”

“Who was that Poison Expert you talked with?” Mr. Weasley said through the tears streaming down his face unnoticed. “I’d like to thank him.”

“He prefers to remain anonymous so I can’t tell you,” Lemon answered. “But I will pass along your thanks.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Weasley replied, shaking the man’s hand. “Can we see them now?”

That day passed quickly. The people living in number 12 Grimmauld Place spent the day celebrating and sleeping. The twins were still alive and would recover, eventually. Harry slept rather well, though he had his normal dreams. A huge weight was lifted from everyone’s shoulders and they felt free.

Late that afternoon they all headed back for St. Mungo’s. This time they were all allowed to see the twins together. Harry thought they looked better, but not by much. Mrs. Weasley looked slightly tortured by the state her boys were in, but she also looked relieved. No one could get over the feelings from the night before. They were all thankful to be here, not visiting for the last time, but just to say hi.

The twins didn’t wake from their unconsciousness, and soon a Healer came by to say that visiting hours were over and that they had to leave now. As they were leaving the hospital, Ginny turned to Harry with a smile on her face. “Thanks for always ending up in the infirmary wing at Hogwarts. It’s easy to sneak back in after Madam Pomfrey kicks us out.”

“You’re welcome, I guess,” Harry answered her.

“Hey, what’s this about you sneaking back?” Ron asked, both intrigued and a bit alarmed.

“I wasn’t talking to you, Ron, so butt out,” Ginny said sticking out her tongue. Harry caught it and continued to hold it as they walked along.

“I thought I told you not to stick that out,” he told her with a laugh. “It’s not very lady-like.” Ron started laughing hard and, rather reluctantly, Bill and Charlie joined in. Sticking out her tongue was Ginny’s favorite come back. Hermione hit Harry’s arm and he let go.

“And that’s not very gentlemanly of you, Harry,” Hermione scolded him. He could tell she was trying not to laugh. Ginny started to pout and sped up to walk between Remus and Tonks. Harry watched her leave and tried not to laugh. She wouldn’t be angry for long and

Remus was looking very cross, because he had been holding his fiancée's hand.

A few days later, Remus entered the library where Ron, Hermione, Harry, and Ginny were dutifully doing homework. Harry watched as the werewolf sat at the table across from him. "What's up, Remus?"

"Not much," Remus answered. "I thought I should give these back to you." Remus reached into a pocket and took out the friendship necklaces that Harry had gotten for Christmas. "I'm not sure where you got them, but they are works of art. Professor Flitwick said he had never seen finer charm work."

"What charms are on them?" Ginny asked curiously.

"I'm not sure. You'd have to ask Flitwick," Remus replied with a shrug. "All I know is that they're safe and Flitwick recommended that you wear them." The three put them on and Harry felt that wave of magic pass over him again. "And, Harry, you should really wear you dad's ring. He'd want you to."

"Why?" Ginny asked, expecting some prank.

"It's a surprise," Remus said with a laugh. "But it's not a bad one. A rather good one if you ask me."

Later that evening, Mr. Weasley pulled Harry away from the group who were sitting in the library. Harry followed the man into the empty front room, curiosity all but radiating from him.

"At the end of Christmas break," Mr. Weasley started, looking out the window, "I remember telling you that you would need to regain my trust." Harry nodded, a faint blush coming to his cheeks at the memory of that morning. "I believe you have already. This is much sooner than I expected, but I watched you as you helped Ginny through this trial and I can't ever express my thanks for it."

"You don't have to, Mr. Weasley," Harry replied quickly. "I'm just glad Ginny puts up with me." Mr. Weasley smiled.

"I believe I do have to thank you," Mr. Weasley continued. "Ginny is the first girl born in the Weasley family for generations. This, I believe, is one of the reasons for my boys' over-protectiveness. They will forgive you and accept you once they let themselves see how good you are to, and for, my baby girl." Harry nodded, embarrassed by the hidden compliments. "Thank you for taking such great care of her. I couldn't ask for a better man for my only daughter." Mr. Weasley offered to shake Harry's hand and Harry did. He watched the older man stand, slowly, and leave the room.

Harry hadn't thought he'd regain the trust so quickly or easily. But somehow he had, and it was yet another weight off his young shoulders.

Before Ron or Harry was ready for it, it was time to head back to school. Ron and Harry spent the whole ride back to Hogwarts playing games and joking around. Hermione and Ginny were both trying to study, but they found themselves joining in on the fun every so often.

But then they arrived at Hogwarts, and Harry realized that he had left all the homework he had done over break at Grimmauld. He told Ron his predicament and all Ron could do was laugh. Ginny told him to write Mrs. Weasley and ask her to look for it. Hermione suggested that he re-do the Potions and Transfiguration essays, just in case. He wrote Mrs. Weasley a note and handed it to Ginny who had agreed to send it to her mum for him. He ate quickly and then went to the common room to work.

The next morning, Harry was glad that he had followed Hermione's advice. Mrs. Weasley sent a note telling him that she couldn't find his essays, but she'd keep looking. Harry walked with Ron and Hermione to their first class, Potions. Snape was in a foul mood. Harry was glad he had re-done the essay.

"Map how this poison reacts with the body," Snape said waspishly to the class. "Then identify it and show how the antidote and poison reacts to each other and the human body. When you are done, bring it to the front and get your night's homework." Harry looked at the paper Snape had just put on his desk. A very complex poison was described on the paper using only its ingredients. Harry took out his

quill and ink and started the potion map. About half way through he recognized the poison.

Harry dug through his backpack, looking for Snape's notebook. Having found it, Harry paged through it, until he found the potion he was looking for. This poison was the same poison the twins had been given. Harry finished the map. He stared, horrified, at the damage the poison did to the body. Snape had named it the Silent Killer. It was aptly named. It caused the victim horrible amount of pain, but rendered the victim unable to show the pain. The poison dulled the nerves between the brain and muscles, making it impossible to move or speak. And then it tore the body apart from the inside out.

Harry read the notes Snape had made about this poison. The antidote could only be given at certain times. Depending on the progression of the poison, the antidote had to be changed. Which antidote did Snape want them to use?

Harry raised his hand. Snape ignored it for a while, but finally called on Harry. "Professor, which form of the antidote do you want us to use?"

"You are already done with the map?" Snape asked, striding over to look at Harry's paper. "Use the last ditch effort." Harry nodded and then realization hit him. Snape was the Poison Expert Healer Lemon had spoken with.

Harry finished mapping the antidote's reaction to the poison and the body. Ron was flipping through the notebook looking for the poison and Hermione was about halfway through the last step. Harry walked to the front and handed Snape his work. Snape looked it over and then handed Harry that night's homework. Harry stared at it as he went back to his seat. It was the most complex map Snape had ever asked any of them to fill out. Three poisons working in tandem. It also meant that the antidotes would have to be doctored. He could already hear Ron's complaints.

Harry dutifully started work on that night's homework. He showed Ron the page the poison was on so that the boy could start working on the last map. As Harry worked, he was glad they had two nights to

work on this. The bell rang a long while later. Harry packed up his bag and headed to the Great Hall. Keene had decided that this room was the best for his class. He spent the time drilling Harry's memory and was pleased that Harry remembered all of the spells he had learnt.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Ron asked Harry Wednesday night. He had to yell over the noise of the wind.

"No idea, really," Harry shouted back. Harry maneuvered his broom next to Hermione's dorm room window. It was open and Harry flew in. He touched the floor carefully, but nothing happened. "All clear," he shouted out to Ron. Harry walked over to the door and locked it. Neville was going to keep the girls occupied downstairs, while he and Ron put their plans into action.

Ron waked over to a bookshelf and started pulling out the textbooks. "Don't pull them all out, we need to put them back the way we found them," Harry scolded. Ron stopped and picked up one of the books.

"Deleo," Ron whispered, clearing Hermione's Defense book. Harry grabbed her potion's text and cleared it the same way. They slowly made their way through all of her books. When they had finished with all but the book she was using at the moment, Harry went to her desk.

"The girl's sure have large dorm rooms," Ron muttered to Harry. "Look, they each have a desk, a bookshelf, a bed, a dresser, and room for their trunks. We're stuck sharing just about everything." Harry just shrugged. He didn't care that much. He looked in the drawers until he found all of Hermione's notes for the year.

"Put these in your bag," Harry said handing them to Ron. "Don't mess their order up. I don't want to get in that much trouble." Ron slipped them into his book bag and mounted his broom. "Go check Ginny's room and make sure to lock the door." Ron nodded and flew out the window. Once Ron left, Harry took out one of Hermione's books and wrote a quick note to her. He put it back. Harry, then, unlocked the door and flew out the window also. They repeated the prank with Ginny's books and notes.

Back in their dorm room Harry and Ron showed off their treasures to Dean and Seamus. "I can't believe it worked," Seamus said in awe.

The boys split up Hermione's notes and started to copy them. This whole plan had started when Hermione had decided not to share her notes. She had yelled at Ron, Harry, Dean, Seamus, and Neville when they had asked to borrow them over break. Needing the notes, the boys had worked out this plan. Hopefully, Ginny and Hermione would be too distracted with the blank books to notice the missing notes.

"Why'd you take Ginny's?" Dean asked quietly.

"So that Hermione doesn't catch on to the true reason for the prank," Ron answered. They copied the notes for a while and then headed downstairs.

"You missed a good game of Exploding Snap, Neville," Dean told the boy. It was the code to tell Neville that everything went all right. "And we didn't disturb you wonderful ladies."

"Shut up, Dean," Hermione said waspishly. "I'm going to go get my Transfiguration book to study from. Anyone want to study with me?"

"Why would we?" Seamus asked. "Exams aren't for another month."

Hermione stalked off with a muttered, "Lazy." The boys broke into laughter.

"I don't know how you two put up with her all the time," Dean told Ron and Harry. "She's so uptight. It'd drive me insane."

"But she's got the best notes in the year," Ron answered. "Do you think she was serious about not letting us use them?" Harry shrugged. He had to conceal a smile when they heard Hermione's shriek.

"What did you guys do to my books?" she yelled at them as she ran down the stairs. The room became deathly quiet. "They're blank! How will I be able to study if my books are blank?"

“Why is it our fault?” Ron asked, trying to wrap his arms around her waist. “What happened, ‘Mione?”

“My books are blank,” Hermione screamed, pulling away from Ron. “And who else would do that?”

“Hermione, did you slide down the stairs?” Harry asked logically.

“No, and what does that matter, Harry!” she yelled in response.

“Because if any guy tries to climb the stairs to the girl’s dorm, the stairs turn into a slide, remember?” he asked rhetorically. “Your books were safe and sound in your room, right?” Hermione nodded. “Then we couldn’t have done it.”

“Is she going to apologize?” Seamus asked hesitantly. “Because if I would have accused her of something without proof and then shown the error of my ways, she’d demand one.” Hermione turned on her heel and ran back up the stairs, slamming the door shut.

“Whatever you guys did, you should be ashamed of yourselves,” Ginny told them. She stormed up the stairs, going to comfort Hermione.

“Do you think we went too far?” Neville asked quietly.

“Nah,” Ron and Harry answered together. Ron continued, “She’s just shocked and confused. She knows we did it, but she can’t figure out how.”

“Harry Potter, I’m going to wring your neck!” Ginny screamed as she flew down the stairs. She launched herself at him, but Harry caught her wrists in his hands. He turned her around and wrapped her in his arms.

“Why are you trying to wring my neck?” he asked curiously.

“My books are blank too!” she yelled.

“Like Harry told Hermione, we couldn’t have,” Ron told her. “Now stop trying to kill my best mate.”

“Over my dead body,” Ginny said through gritted teeth.

“Don’t joke about that, Gin,” Harry told her, letting go of her. She stormed up the stairs. “I hope this is worth it,” Harry said to the other guys.

“We’d better go finish the notes,” Neville finally said.

The next morning was rather uncomfortable at the Gryffindor table. All the girls were mad at the sixth year boys. All the boys were defending the sixth year boys, whether they knew the truth or not. The seating on the table was boys at one end, girls at another. This wasn’t missed by the Head of House, who walked over to question the nearest prefect.

“Is anything the matter, Mr. Weasley?” McGonagall asked Ron.

“Oh, no, Professor,” he lied to her smoothly. “The girls are blaming us for a prank that we couldn’t possibly have committed. But other than that, nothing is amiss.” McGonagall gave him a piercing glare and then went back to her seat at the teachers’ table. “I can’t believe she didn’t talk to Hermione about it.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Harry cautioned. “She might talk to Hermione later.”

“How long do we keep this up?” Neville asked the others.

“Until the notes are all copied,” Dean replied. “No use going to all this trouble if we give up halfway through.” The others nodded.

The day was a long one. It was hard without Hermione or Ginny talking to them, but the day did pass. None of the other teachers commented, and McGonagall didn’t ask to see them after their Transfiguration class at the end of the day. Thia didn’t even mention it at the training session.

When Harry made it back to the common room, he noticed his roommates sitting in front of the fire. He walked over to them. "Is all well?"

"Oh yeah," Ron said happily. "I'm all done with the notes I borrowed from you. Do you want them back?"

"Sure," Harry followed Ron up to their room. Hermione and Ginny were sitting on their beds, the notes in their hands.

"So how did you guys do it?" Ginny asked sounding impressed despite herself.

"We couldn't tell you that!" Ron said disbelievingly.

"So you admit to it?" Hermione asked hopefully. Ron went over to her and hugged her.

"Ewww... PDA!" Ginny yelled covering her eyes.

"PDA?" Harry asked curiously.

"Public display of affection. It's a phrase Fred and George came up with when Bill first started dating. I think they've forgotten all about it, 'cause I'm sure they would use it with Remus and Tonks," Ginny explained. "That's just disgusting," she said as Ron and Hermione started kissing.

"You're telling me," Harry said. "Stop it or I'll destroy your notes, Hermione." Hermione pulled out of the embrace.

"You wouldn't?" she asked horrified.

"Of course I would," Harry answered stoically.

"How do I fix my books?" Ginny asked, diverting the coming row.

"Recreo should do the trick," Harry answered. Ron and Hermione went to fix her books. Hermione had taken them all downstairs and spread them out over two of the long tables. Though it had many fifth

and seventh year students angry, Hermione had been pouring over her books, trying to figure out how to fix them.

“You want to do something Saturday?” Harry asked Ginny.

“Sure.”

“Meet me in the kitchens at 6:30 Saturday night,” Harry told her, kissing her forehead.

“Does Ron know you’re taking me out tonight?” Ginny asked curiously.

“No, he doesn’t,” Harry answered with a shrug. “I don’t see why he’d have to know.” Harry was carrying their brooms and a large blanket, while Ginny had a large basket filled with food they had just made in the kitchens. The house elves were a little put out when Harry had told them that they’d be making the food. However, he and Ginny needed so much help the elves felt much better.

“I hope you don’t get him angry at you,” Ginny warned him. “I heard Ron yelling at Bill and Charlie over break. I can’t remember any other time when Ron yelled at both of them at the same time.”

“If he wants me to check in with him,” Harry said, leading the way to the Quidditch pitch, “he can tell me when and where he’s taking Hermione out. Until he starts, I’m not telling.” Ginny started laughing. “Race you to the center of the pitch.”

“That’s not fair. You don’t have such a heavy load,” Ginny pretended to complain. Harry grabbed the basket and she took off. Harry chased after her, his long legs catching up to her. But the heavy basket held him back and he couldn’t keep the sprint up. Ginny fell to the ground in the center and Harry set the food, blanket, and brooms down, before he collapsed next to her.

They caught their breath and lay staring at the thousands of stars above them. “I always wanted a star,” Ginny mumbled under her breath.

"Let's go catch one, then," Harry said jumping up. He picked up his broom and waited for Ginny to grab hers. When she didn't, he asked her confused, "Why aren't you on your broom?"

"I was wondering if I could fly with you?" she asked embarrassed. "There's no way my broom could reach the stars; maybe yours will be able to."

Harry laughed and made room for Ginny. She wrapped her arms around his waist and Harry kicked off the ground. He went into a vertical climb. Harry felt Ginny's arms tighten and he laughed. He loved climbing and diving. Harry leveled out when the broom started to shudder under them. He had never been so high above the ground before.

"This is amazing," Ginny whispered in his ear. They looked down at the miniature Hogwarts castle and its grounds. It was so tiny. Harry could only pin point Hagrid's hut by the smoke coming from the chimney. The mountains were astoundingly clear and huge.

"Can you reach a star?" Harry yelled back at her, a smile on his lips. Harry felt Ginny laugh behind him.

"Nope," she said in his ear. Harry laughed and dove straight down. Ginny screamed in fear and her arms tightened even more. Harry let out a whoop! He loved this. He leveled out the dive and hovered a decent distance above the ground. "Harry Potter, you could have killed us!" she shouted at him.

"No way, Gin," he told her. "I wouldn't do anything to hurt that beautiful face of yours!" Ginny hit him over the head, but then hugged him.

"Thanks, luv," she whispered in his ear. Harry smiled at her and then dove for the ground. This time Ginny yelled with him, enjoying the freedom of the dive. She got off and pulled Harry into a passionate kiss. Harry leaned out of the kiss and stared at the girl in his arms.

"You hungry?" he asked her. He was rewarded with another kiss and a hit across the head. They sat and ate the picnic meal they had made. "I think we'll have to live with your mum, 'cause we're both horrible cooks!" Ginny laughed, but agreed with him. They ate it happily and then sat back to look at the stars. They pointed out different constellations and created a few new ones.

Ginny scrunched up a corner of the blanket and lay down, using it as a pillow. "I love it out here! I want to live somewhere where you can see all the stars."

"How about next to an ocean?" Harry asked her innocently.

"I'd love that too," she said softly. Harry looked over at her nervously. "What's the matter, luv?" Harry turned his back to her and laid his head on her stomach, looking at the stars.

"You don't mind, do you, Gin?" Harry asked after a little bit.

"Nope," she answered, running a hand through his hair. Harry felt his body relax. They lay like that for a long time, Harry trying not to fall asleep. He hadn't slept well the night before or the night before that. I am not going to fall asleep! I am... not... gonna... fall.....

Ginny smiled at the sleeping form of her Harry Potter. He needed every moment of sleep he could get. She shook her head at the boy. Harry thought he kept his weariness from her and the others, but it wasn't that hard to see.

She looked at the constellation she had created. She hadn't dared point it out to Harry though. He might ask when she had first named it and she was too embarrassed to admit that she had found it her first astronomy lesson all those years ago. It was a lightning bolt. She called it 'The Harry.' She laughed at her foolish eleven year-old self. But here she was four and half years later, with Harry sleeping on her stomach.

Harry started to murmur something in his sleep and Ginny looked down at him. She couldn't make out his words. Carefully, she lifted up

his head and sat up. With his head resting in her lap she leaned close to his mouth, listening to his words.

"No, no, please, no," he mumbled. "Not another, no, please..." Ginny felt her heart break. She hated that he suffered at night with these nightmares. The visions weren't any better.

"What is the weapon?" Voldemort screamed at the prostrated form of Rookwood.

"I don't know, my Lord," Rookwood answered in a wavering voice.

"What was that?" Voldemort asked the now terrified man.

"I don't know, my Lord," the man muttered. Harry felt himself hoping that the man wouldn't be tortured yet again that night.

"You don't know?" Voldemort said sadistically. "Crucio!" The man writhed on the ground, screaming his throat out. After several moments Voldemort released the man. "I want it! I didn't waste my time going to the States for nothing. It is important to get such a weapon! With a weapon such as that, I'll be able to destroy Hogwarts once and for all! Dumbledore trusted that traitorous scum Carrigan with that weapon, and I want to know why! I want to know where it is! DO NOT FAIL ME!" Voldemort finished in a soft, but deadly tone. Harry would have rather had Voldemort scream then use the tone he did.

"Yes, my Lord," Rookwood managed to say.

"Avery, come forward!" Voldemort said in the deadly tone. Avery crept forward on his knees. "The poison failed. You administered it, correct?" Avery nodded. "Crucio!" The man struggled against the pain, before the scream was ripped from his lips. Even after the curse was lifted, the man still screamed. "Nott, come forward." Theodore Senior made his way forward on his knees.

"How may I serve my master?" he said in an oily voice.

“Did you brew the poison given to the blood-traitor twins?” Voldemort asked. Nott nodded, his face losing its look of pride. “Very well, Crucio!” Harry screamed with Nott, his scar ripping open.

What’s the matter, luv? Ginny asked silently. Harry wouldn’t wake up, no matter how much she shook him. She remembered the time back in February when he wouldn’t wake up and started to sing to him.

“You’re safe while you’re asleep in my arms,

Two arms holding you tight,

Makes everything right.

I’ll hold you again but until then.

Just sleep my luv...I am here beside you.

I am here beside you.”

She sang through the song twice and Harry calmed down. She started the song again and sighed when his eyes opened. “You have a beautiful voice, Gin,” he told her softly. Ginny smiled and hugged him.

A guy could get used to waking up to such a beautiful face and such a hug, Harry thought to himself. She finally let go and Harry sat up. He needed to speak to Dumbledore. “Want to go to Dumbledore’s office with me?” Ginny nodded, but motioned to all the stuff they had brought. “We can leave it in the locker room and take care of it later.” Ginny nodded and helped gather everything. Soon they were in the castle and on the stairs heading up to the Headmaster’s office.

“Come in,” Dumbledore’s voice called. As soon as Harry entered the room, he cursed his luck. There was an Order meeting going on, and all of the Weasleys that were able were there. Bill and Charlie shot glares at him. “What can I do for you, Harry?”

“I was wondering if I could speak with you alone,” Harry asked with more authority than he felt he had.

"If you'd wait until after the meeting, I'd be more than willing to speak with you," Dumbledore answered with a twinkle in his eye. Harry nodded and led Ginny out of the office and down the stairs. They sat on the floor opposite the gargoyles that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"You're a coward, Harry," Ginny laughed at him.

"I'm not going to willingly tell your brothers that I fell asleep on your stomach!" Harry told her incredulously. "And I'm not going to tell them that I woke up in your lap." Ginny laughed and Harry joined in. "Sorry about falling asleep. I'm not very good with dates, am I?"

"I don't mind, luv, you are rather cute asleep," she answered him. "And don't worry about my brothers. I'll deal with them." She smiled viciously.

"Don't repeat yourself from last week," Harry told her. "That was humiliating."

"What?" Ginny asked innocently.

"Telling them that I'll shag you somewhere inappropriate," Harry informed her. "You did a nice job with Charlie later though."

"There you are, Harry," Hermione said out of breath. "We've been looking for you."

"Yeah," Ron said, before he collapsed against the wall next to Harry. "The necklaces grew warm and Hermione and I knew that you weren't okay."

"Where have you been, Harry?" Hermione asked him from the other side of Ron.

"We were on a date. He fell asleep, and I let him sleep on," Ginny explained. "Only he had another vision. We went to talk to Dumbledore, but he's in the middle of an Order meeting. We're waiting for that to get over now."

"Thanks, Harry," Harry told her sarcastically. "I thought I was Harry, but I guess you are." Harry turned to Ron and spoke to him, "She's annoying, I don't know how you put up with her, Ron."

"I just ignore her," Ron told him. "She usually goes away after awhile."

"Oh, well, I don't want that," Harry said, kissing the tip of Ginny's nose. "I like her too much to want her to leave." Ginny smiled up at him and opened her mouth to reply when the gargoyles jumped aside. Professors Snape and McGonagall walked toward them.

"Professor Dumbledore will see you now," McGonagall told them. "He's waiting for you." Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione walked forward and waited as the stairs took them to Dumbledore's office. Out of habit, Harry knocked on the door.

"Come in, Harry," Dumbledore said cheerfully. Once again, Harry cursed his luck. The Weasleys had all stayed, along with Thia, Remus, and Tonks. "I see Ron and Hermione are joining us as well." Harry nodded, looking at Ginny. How do I start this? Harry thought desperately. "What do you have to tell me?"

"Harry and I were on a date earlier this evening, Professor," Ginny said, coming to his rescue. Dumbledore's eyes were positively glittering. "He fell asleep at the end and I let him sleep. He doesn't get enough as it is."

"I slipped right into a vision from Voldemort," Harry continued. He explained what he saw. The Weasleys took interest in the fact that it was Avery that gave the potion to the twins and Nott was the one to brew it.

"Is that all?" Dumbledore asked.

"I was just wondering what Voldemort is looking for," Harry asked; bring the attention back to Dumbledore. "Whatever it is, the Carrigans died because of it and he wants it extremely bad. Rookwood was looking for it at the start of the year."

“How do you know that?” Remus asked him intently.

“A different vision,” Harry answered with a shrug.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that, Harry,” Dumbledore responded sadly. “I’m not able to actually.”

Harry felt his temper rise, but he didn’t let it control him. He wouldn’t blow up yet again at Dumbledore. “May I ask you why, sir?”

“It’s simple, actually,” Dumbledore told him. “I’m not at a liberty to say because the Fidelius Charm protects it and the keeper.” Harry nodded. “May I ask a question?” Harry nodded again. “If you were on a date, how did Ron and Hermione find about your predicament?”

“The necklaces, headmaster,” Ron replied, taking it out. “They became warm and we knew that Harry wasn’t alright.”

“Oh, yes, those wonderful charms,” Dumbledore answered. “Those were better gifts than even you know, Harry. Is that all?” Harry thought about it for a bit.

“Yes, sir,” Harry finally answered. “See you tomorrow, Thia, Tonks, and Remus. Nice seeing you all,” Harry said to the Weasleys. Ginny hugged her mum and dad. Then the group left for the common room.

“She completely ignored us,” Charlie said amazed.

“Well, it might help if you two weren’t staring daggers at the love of her life,” Thia told them honestly. “But that’s coming from a little sister whose brother actually yelled every time he saw his sister with her boyfriend.”

“I did not, Thia,” Remus said following her out the door. “Only when I walked in on—” The door shut behind Thia, Remus, and Tonks.

“What aren’t you telling him this time, Albus?” Molly asked. The Weasley men recognized that tone of voice. Each was glad it wasn’t focused on them.

“Nothing on purpose,” Dumbledore answered. “I can not tell him, because the secret is guarded by that charm. And that is for the best. The fewer that know about it the better off we’ll be.”

“If this comes back to haunt us...” she said warningly.

“It won’t be my fault this time, Molly. It will be the secret keeper’s,” Dumbledore said honestly. He stood up. “Well, I think that was a productive meeting, don’t you? Until next time.” They heard the dismissal in his tone of voice and left.

“So, we’re not telling them that you are the secret keeper?” Phineas Nigellus asked the Headmaster sarcastically polite.

“I can not tell her secret. She deserves the little protection I can give her,” Dumbledore told the portraits of the ex-headmasters and mistresses. He rubbed his temples, all the twinkle gone from his eyes.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Few in Written History

Hey, Mr. Hero,
Walking a thin, fine line
Under the microscope of life.
Remember your roots, my friend.
They're right down below,
'Cause heroes come and heroes go.

Creed: Are You Ready?

"Avelgule!" Harry shouted, aiming for Thia's head. The spell flew right past her ear.

"Ingravesco!" Thia shot back at Harry. As he moved to his right, he realized that a second one was heading straight at him now. The curse hit him square in the chest and he fell to the ground heavily. He felt as if he weighed a thousand pounds. Keene had just taught him this curse. It was a curse few people knew, including Death Eaters, so Harry was planning on teaching it to the D.A. once they were ready for it. But in order to teach it, he'd need to learn the counter spell. What was the counter?

"Tenuis!" Harry spoke the incantation, thankful that it didn't require a wand movement. He rolled to the side as a stunner hit the ground where he had just been laying.

"Tres Flechum!" Harry shouted. The three arrows flew toward Thia.

"Accio desk!" she said, causing a desk to fly in front of her. The arrows thudded into the wood as she shot a spell at Harry, "Diffindo!"

Harry ducked the severing charm and sent a stunner at Thia. She ducked the first one, the second one, but the third hit her, square in the chest. Harry expected her to stumble, barely. He hadn't put a lot of magic behind that spell, but she fell to the ground, out cold.

Harry rushed to her side, falling to his knees when he got there. "Ennervate!" he said, casting the spell to wake her. She sat up,

rubbing at her eyes groggily. "Are you alright, Thia?" he asked her nervously.

She looked at him with eyes as round as saucers. "Am I alright?" she repeated. She took a moment to sort her thoughts out. "Yeah, I'm fine. I didn't even notice you cast that. Did you whisper it?" Harry nodded. "Really! Well," she said jumping up, "that's great!"

"Why?" Harry asked nervously. "This isn't a new way to torture me is it? 'Cause Bryant's been working me extra hard since I beat him, just once, last week."

Thia laughed. "Yes and no. It's great, because it takes 'mature' magic to act like that."

"'Mature'?" Harry asked seriously doubting her.

"Okay, so that's not the best way to put it," Thia admitted. "In fact, it's a horrible way to say it. Let me think of a better way to explain it, as you clean up." Harry shot her an unhappy glare and then turned to put the room back in order. Once the room was clean, he looked over at the thinking Thia.

"So?" he asked curiously.

"I can't figure out how to explain it right," she answered with a shrug. "So just bear with me and if you're still confused when I'm done, we'll go find Keene. All right?" Harry nodded. "Okay, most people force power into a spell by how loud and how earnestly they say the spell. Some even force the power in by exact wand movements. That's fine, for most people. Actually, fine for all but the ones with the most potential. Follow?" Harry nodded.

"But I just whispered that spell. I didn't even expect it to knock you out," Harry informed her.

"Yes, that's the odd thing about this," Thia said, nodding in understanding. "You didn't speak louder or more forcefully nor did you force the magic in with your movements. You didn't even put more power in by thinking about it, which is normally the case in this

third way. It just happened. Which could be one of two reasons.” Thia stopped and started thinking. Harry waited patiently for as long as he could.

“And those are—?” Harry asked impatiently.

“Well, because you just stumbled on this talent, it might be a fluke and you’ll have to think about it in the future,” Thia finally started. “But you managed this back in November, remember? The weekend we found out that Vance was Minister. Right before Voldemort sent you that invitation.” Harry nodded. “Well, I completely forgot about it with all that excitement, but I just remembered it. The other reason is more of a guess, so don’t go quoting me on it.” Harry nodded.

“It could be that you’re an exception to the rules.” Harry groaned. “I know you hate it, and more than likely I’m wrong. I need to talk this over with the others. I’m not an expert at this. I can’t even do what you just did, so bear with me. I’ll get back to you after I speak with the others about it.”

“Can’t I come along?” Harry asked longingly.

“No,” Thia said after a moment’s hesitation. “I don’t think they’d like talking about you with you there. But I’ll see if I can get them to talk with you later.” Harry nodded. He wouldn’t get a better deal. “See you tomorrow during class.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied with a sigh. Thia looked at him with concern.

“What’s the matter, Harry?” she asked.

“You know my mum’s gift?” Harry asked as an answer. Thia nodded. “Well I haven’t opened it yet.”

“You haven’t opened it?” Thia exclaimed in amazement.

“No, between forgetting about it with everything that’s been going on or complete nervousness, I haven’t gotten around to it,” Harry explained. “I know it’s horrible of me, but I’m not sure if I want to open it.”

"Why's that horrible of you?" Thia asked. "I always have a hard time reading any letters written to me by deceased friends. And unfortunately, that's a tradition among Aurors."

"But I want to, until I slip my finger under the tape," Harry explained.

"Then just open it," Thia replied with a laugh. "Harry, I can't tell you what you should do. Lily was your mum, not mine. She left that for you, not me. It's your choice." Harry nodded. "Lily was the closest thing I've had to a sister. I know that whatever she left for you, she wants you to have it. And it'll probably help if you opened it. Lily was good with things that dealt with feelings. Except when your dad was involved, that is." Thia started to laugh at memories long gone and nearly forgotten. "Look, Harry, your parents loved you. James left you their rings. Those meant the world to him. Lily would have left you something just as important."

"Yeah," Harry said quietly. "Thanks. See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Thia said in farewell.

"You knocked her out?" Hermione asked later that night, after Harry explained what had happened and what Thia and he had talked about, with the exception of the gift.

"Yeah," Harry answered.

"That's amazing, Harry," Hermione breathed out, excited beyond belief. "There aren't many people who can do that! Merlin was supposedly able to and there are reports that Dumbledore is capable. Some of the legends surrounding the four founders say that all four were talented with that form of magic. This is unbelievable, Harry. You'd be one of the few in written history!"

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said sarcastically, "but I'd rather not be one of the few. It's bad enough being the only person to have survived the Killing Curse."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione apologized immediately. "I didn't think of that."

"That's okay, Hermione," Harry told her. "I didn't mean to snap. So, that's what Hermione thinks. What about you two?" Harry asked Ron and Ginny.

"If it'll help you, then I'm happy," Ginny said, squeezing his hand and snuggling closer to him.

"I think it's bloody brilliant," Ron said excitedly. "Think of it. You wouldn't have to say the transfiguration spell in order to change Malfoy into a ferret. And if you didn't say it, they can't prove you did it!" Harry laughed with Ron.

"He does make a nice ferret, doesn't he," Harry laughed. "Bet he'd bite you if you tried to pet him." Hermione made a disgruntled noise and Harry turned to her. "You can't actually be taking Malfoy's side, Hermione. You are, after all, the only one of us to actually hit Draco without provocation."

"He did provoke me!" Hermione sputtered out. This caused Ron and Harry to laugh harder. "Go ahead and laugh. I'll just tell Moaning Myrtle that you both have huge crushes on her."

"You wouldn't?" Ron asked, horrified.

"I would," Hermione replied. The couple continued arguing for a bit.

"I'm going to bed," Ginny said, interrupting the lovers' spat that Ron and Hermione had started.

"I'll walk you to your stairs," Harry said, thankful for the excuse to leave.

"I can walk myself," Ginny told him.

"I know, but I want to head to bed too, so we're both going the same way. We might as well walk next to each other." Ginny smiled up at

him and took his hand. They walked to the stairs and kissed each other goodnight.

That Saturday was the Slytherin versus Hufflepuff game. The weather was perfect for a Quidditch game, and Harry hoped it'd be a good game. He wasn't surprised, though, when the Slytherin chasers scored three times in five minutes.

Ginny sat to his left and Ron sat to his right. Hermione was on Ron's other side. The Gryffindors were staying neutral in this game. Neither team was in contention for the cup, unless something unbelievable happened. This year's cup would be won by either Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. And if Harry had to bet, he'd bet on Gryffindor.

The game was about an hour long. It ended in a thrilling chase of the snitch by both Seekers. Sephra missed the snitch by scant centimeters, so Summerby was able to catch it. Even with those 150 points, Slytherin won. "It's 200-180, Slytherin!" Dean's voice called out. "Slytherin's chasers won it for them!"

The student body headed to the Great Hall, talking about the game excitedly. Slytherin's chasers were amazing. The main discussion was whether Gryffindor would have won against this Slytherin team.

"I think they'd have lost," a Hufflepuff boy walking near Harry said. "Sure Gryffindor's girls are good, but did you see the way Slytherin's chasers flew today. Even if Harry Potter caught the snitch, I'd say they'd have lost."

"But Gryffindor's chasers are more experienced than Hufflepuff's," the Ravenclaw talking to the boy said. "They'd have confused Slytherin's chasers without..."

"Do you guys want to head to the common room?" Harry asked annoyed. The three nodded. "I hate getting talked about, even if it is positive."

"Yeah," Ron mumbled in answer.

"Do you think we'd have beat them?" Ginny asked after a moment.

“Yes,” Ron and Harry said right away. “Hufflepuff's chasers just let Slytherin's control the tempo of the game,” Harry continued. “You girls would have disrupted them and set the tempo yourselves. Just like Ravenclaw did, back in January.”

“Not to mention, that Gryffindor has a better keeper than Hufflepuff,” Ron added pompously.

“Shove it, Weasley. No one likes a big head,” Harry said, pushing Ron into a suit of armor.

“Hey, get back here, Potter!” Ron yelled, trying desperately to untangle himself from the pieces. The three others continued walking, though it took Hermione's all not to turn around and help him. “Okay, this isn't funny! I can't get out!” Harry and Ginny started laughing, but they turned around. They got Ron out of the mess and tried desperately to put the armor back together. None of them noticed Mrs. Norris slink away.

“Okay, I think this goes on top of this piece,” Harry said, trying to make it fit.

“No, it goes under,” Ginny said, grabbing the metal from him.

“Well, I got these pieces to fit,” Ron said, showing them what he had accomplished. Two pieces were shoved together and Harry could easily tell that they didn't go together.

“I don't think that goes there, Ron,” Hermione said with a laugh. “That's an arm piece and that's a leg piece.”

“You're right, missy,” Filch's voice said. “And you're all in trouble. If I have my way, you'll be hung upside down for this. It takes me five hours to put one of those back together!” He started to head to his office. “Well, come along. I need to write up detention slips.”

“Deten—” Ron started before Hermione stepped on his foot. Filch continued muttering about the good old days as he led them to his office. Harry didn't want to serve another detention. The one last

week with Snape had been bad enough. Not to mention Harry could think of better things to do with his time.

“Sit,” Filch ordered them.

“There aren’t enough chairs,” Hermione pointed out stupidly.

“Are you wizards?” Filch asked. They nodded. “Then conjure your own.” Hermione blushed and Harry had a hard time not hitting the man. That was uncalled for. Harry conjured four cushy chairs for his friends and they sat in them. He stared at Filch, in a disconcerting fashion. “Ah, here we are. Names: Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, and Ginerva Weasley. Crime: destruction of school property. Suggested Punishment: three nights of detention.” Harry’s jaw dropped. That’s outrageous!

“Are you sure only three nights, Mr. Filch, sir?” Hermione asked in a small penitent voice. Ron and Harry looked at her, but Harry vividly remembered every time Hermione had lied to get them out of trouble, take the troll as the first of many examples. “I’d be tempted to give students such as ourselves, two prefects and two Quidditch players, at least five nights of detention.”

“Do you really think so?” Filch asked surprised.

“Yes, sir,” Ginny said, jumping into the lie headfirst. “We completely tore that suit of armor apart. I think Ron damaged those two pieces he shoved together, so you will need to fix those, Mr. Filch.” The man muttered something under his breath.

“Suggested Punishment: five nights of detention,” he muttered as he wrote out a new sheet. “Now all I have to do is give this to your head of house.”

“We’ll take it, sir,” Hermione said, almost in tears. “I’d rather get that yelling out of the way.”

“Hm, you’ll take it to her, will you?” Filch asked suspiciously. Hermione nodded.

"She's a prefect, sir," Harry said pessimistically. "She hasn't lied to a teacher once in all the years we've been here. A liability to my rule breaking, you see. But she's good at fixing essays, so I've kept her around. If she tells you that she'll take it, she'll take it, sir." Filch stared at him hard.

"Well, give it to her tonight!" he commanded them, handing Hermione the paper. "And what's the matter with him?" Filch added pointing to Ron. Harry glared at him, which only made the problem worse. Ron's face was screwed up in a funny way: he was trying not to laugh.

"Oh, he's dreading the Howler our mum will send when she hears of this," Ginny answered gloomily.

"It's okay, Ron," Hermione said, taking his head and hiding it in the hair on her shoulder. "McGonagall won't take away our badges. She can't." Harry hurried them out of the office, up two flights of stairs and down another corridor before stopping and hitting Ron's head. Hermione hit his stomach and Ginny hit his arm.

"You almost ruined that, you prat!" Ginny said, hitting his shoulder again. "I can't believe you! You're a Weasley! How can you not be able to keep a straight face?"

Before Ron could answer, Hermione turned to them. "Let's get this to McGonagall and then complain." That sobered Ron up right away.

"You mean we're actually going to take it to her?" Ron asked surprised.

"Of course," Harry answered. "Filch will ask about it, after all we're going to get five nights worth of detention. I can't believe he took the bait. You're amazing, Hermione."

"What about me?" Ginny asked feigning hurt.

"I'll tell you what I think of you when your brother isn't around," Harry told her with an evil grin. Ginny laughed, but Ron blanched.

"Be careful, Potter," he warned.

"I'm very careful, Weasley," Harry replied airily. "Gin would bite my head off if I wasn't." Ginny laughed harder and grabbed his hand, pulling him away from the angry brother. Hermione dragged her stunned boyfriend after them, searching for their head of house. They found her in her office.

"Professor," Hermione said, sticking her head in the door.

"Come in, Miss Granger," McGonagall said cheerfully. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, we were sent here by Filch and I'm not sure I agree with the punishment," Hermione told the older woman, handing her the slip of parchment.

"And what exactly did you do?" McGonagall asked peering over her glasses at them.

"We knocked a suit of armor over," Harry replied. "We were even trying to fix it, not that we were helping much."

Ten minutes later, they left the office. They waited until after climbing another two stairways and walking down a few corridors before they let out a laugh.

"We only lost 12 points!" Ron said, jumping into the air.

"And we don't have a single detention!" Harry said laughing. He picked up Ginny and whirled her around. "This is great!" Ginny was laughing too hard to stand by the time Harry set her down. She fell to the ground and just laughed. Harry sat next to her. "I can't believe we had to talk McGonagall out of visiting Filch! I'd have loved to see her have a go at him! He wouldn't know what hit him until it was too late."

"Let's get going," Hermione said nervously. "It's past curfew and I don't want to repeat that." Harry nodded, standing. He helped Ginny stand and supported her so she could laugh and walk at the same time.

"You're barmy, Ginny," Ron told his sister. Ginny only laughed harder. "Harry, can you shut her up, I don't want her to give away our position to Mrs. Norris." Harry smiled obligingly and captured Ginny's mouth with his. "Not like that!" Ron cried in horror. "I think I'll be blind for life."

Ginny smiled up to Harry happily, and Harry smiled back at the most beautiful and gorgeous and amazing woman he had ever met. They stood there looking at each other, while Ron tapped his foot impatiently. She really is the most wonderful, gorgeous, loving, amazing, gorgeous, intelligent, funny (have I mentioned gorgeous?) girl I have ever met

"Okay, Potter," Ron said finally. "Eyes off my sister and walk to your room!" he ordered. Harry obeyed, but he kept Ginny's hand in his.

"Get up, Potter," Bryant barked. Harry stood again, putting his sword in the ready position. He and Bryant exchanged blows. Harry managed to attack and defend in equal measures. The fight was going on for forty minutes when someone coughed politely. Harry followed Bryant's lead and grounded his sword, turning to see who had arrived. It was Dumbledore.

"Good day, Lon," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "I need to speak with Harry for a moment." Bryant nodded.

"Then that's it for the day," Bryant said in his hoarse voice. "When you're done talking, take two laps around the lake." Harry nodded and Bryant took the proffered sword. Dumbledore watched the retreating back of the weapons master.

"How are you, Harry?" Dumbledore asked taking a seat on a log. Harry sat crossed leg across from him.

"You wouldn't mind if I stretched while we talk, sir?" Harry asked. "I don't want to cool off before those laps." Dumbledore nodded. "As for your question, I'm fine. Haven't had any overly troubling dreams in a long while. Been sleeping well. Been eating and my grades are way up. And I'm still talking to my friends, which is an added bonus." Dumbledore smiled. "How are you, Headmaster?"

"Oh, I'm well, Harry," Dumbledore answered. "Though another birthday has come and gone and I only received books and horrible devices to help with work. Can a wizard not get a decent pair of socks?" Harry smiled.

"You could have mine, sir," Harry offered, pulling off a shoe.

"I'll think I'll pass on that, Harry," Dumbledore said smiling and waving a hand in front of his face. Harry had to agree, the sock stank. "But down to business." Harry nodded; glad to know what the man wanted. "I'd like to talk to you about your summer plans. You'll be seventeen at the end of July and I can't keep you at your relatives' against your will. However," Dumbledore said putting his hand up, "you do need to spend some time there. Can we come to some type of agreement?"

"We can try, Professor," Harry answered. "How long would you like me to stay?" Harry felt himself wishing for Tonks. She was really good at this bartering stuff. He was rather horrible, but there was no way he'd spend more time with the Dursleys than he had to.

"Through June and most of July," Dumbledore offered. Harry stopped himself from rolling his eyes. There was no way he'd spend that long there. He nearly went insane every summer before and he knew that he'd go insane if he stayed through most of July.

"How about a week?" Harry countered. "It's not long, but it's about all I can handle from them."

"It surely isn't as horrible as you say," Dumbledore replied. "July 15?"

"No, two weeks after school get's out," Harry said. Dumbledore shook his head no. "How about June 21, first day of summer?" Harry offered the old man with a smile.

"Isn't that two weeks after you return home?" Dumbledore asked with a twinkle in his eye. Harry cursed his luck. "But it would have been a good way to start a season. How about that Friday, the 26th I believe."

Harry thought it over. Could he handle three weeks with the Dursleys? It's better than two months, he told himself. "Fine, June 26th. This June 26th," Harry amended and Dumbledore laughed. They sat for a few moments in silence. "Professor, has Thia talked to you about last Thursday?" Dumbledore gave Harry that penetrating look that Harry hated so much.

"She did," Dumbledore answered curtly. Harry looked at the man, surprised. "It's a horrible gift, Harry. I'm not going to lie to you about it. Sure, it has its advantages, but it's a huge burden. I will start training you next fall. I want you to promise me that you won't use it in a juvenile way."

"I promise, Professor," Harry said, looking the old man in the eyes. "Professor, what's Voldemort up to?" Dumbledore sighed and looked out past the lake.

"We aren't exactly sure," Dumbledore answered. "Though we have a new spy, he is a new recruit among their number and he does not get the information Professor Snape was able to get. It is rather frustrating at the moment." Harry nodded.

"Well, I need to start my laps," Harry finally said. "Thank you for talking with me, Professor." Dumbledore stood and smiled at Harry.

"It was my pleasure, Harry," the old man returned. As Harry started to run, he watched Dumbledore walk back to the castle. That was rather informative.

"Good evening," Harry told the D.A. that Friday. "Can I have your attention?" Harry asked staring pointedly at Ron, Hermione, and Ginny who were arguing amongst themselves. They quieted and looked at Harry respectively. "As Ginny has told me a billion times, O.W.L.'s and N.E.W.T.'s are in two weeks time. Do you want to have meetings then? Or should we just wait until after exams for the last meeting of the year?" The group looked at each other. "We didn't have this problem last year, due to other problems. It's up to the fifth and seventh years. I should remind the Gryffindor chasers here that our last game is that Saturday as well. And that goes for the

Ravenclaws, too,” Harry said, smiling at Cho. He would enjoy catching that snitch. Cho had been trash talking for weeks now.

“I think we’d rather continue during those weeks,” a Ravenclaw answered. “Give us something to distract ourselves with.” Harry nodded.

“If you’d rather study during the meeting time, I completely understand,” Harry told the group. “I might have to skip to cram for my Transfiguration exam,” he added, smiling at Professor McGonagall. A few people laughed. “Alright, we’re going to do something new today. As you may have noticed at the start, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were arguing. They have no idea what I have planned, but they’ve made their guesses. And they’re all wrong,” he said looking at them.

“We’re going to split into three groups of twelve. Each group will pick a leader. The object is to capture the other two teams’ flags.” Harry continued to explain the rules. It was basically going to be a mock battle.

Thia and Remus entered the room along with Professors Flitwick and Sinistra. Harry waved an arm at the entering adults. “These wonderful people have agreed to referee this. I’m joining in and I thought it was a bit much to expect just Professor McGonagall to watch. You all remember Professor Lupin?” Harry said pointing to Remus. Everyone nodded and a few called out hello. Lupin smiled and nodded in reply. “Okay, here are the groups.” Harry read off three lists. He had purposefully put himself in the worst group. Ron was in one, by himself, and Hermione and Ginny were in the third.

It was a modified game of capture the flag. Each team had fifteen minutes to set up a defense and plan an offense. Harry accepted the role of leader for his group, but made them come up with the plans. He changed the plans a bit, but not by much. Soon the fifteen minutes were up and the game began.

Harry smiled. It was chaos. Several students were overwhelmed by everything that was going on. Those students were quickly captured. Harry noticed some of his teammates being led to a jail zone. His role

was to break them out. Hermione and Ginny were guarding them. Harry smiled again. This should be fun.

Harry carefully weaved his way through the crowd, making his way slowly to the jail zone. Harry animated a table and used it to distract his friends. They turned to deal with insane table. "Jail break!" Harry shouted, dragging some of his team members back to safe territory. He made it across safely, but looking back, he could tell Ginny was furious. Harry looked over at the other jail zone and saw more of his team there. He started to head that way, when he noticed a red head heading toward his team's flag.

"Oh, no you don't Weasley!" Harry shouted. "The flag!" he shouted again. Harry ran as fast as he could, taking aim at his best mate. "Stupefy!" Ron rolled under the stunner, rising to his feet close to the flag. That's when Hannah Abbot's stunner hit him. Harry smiled, again. Ron had fallen for that one. Harry dragged Ron to the jail zone dropping him to the ground with little ado.

The "meeting" continued in chaos for another 45 minutes, before Harry's team finally managed to get both flags. Even if they had to steal the girl's flag from Ron's group, they had still gotten both. His friends were furious. "You cheat, Potter," Ron grumbled.

"So do you, Weasley," Thia replied. "The game was fair and Harry didn't carry his team, so stop complaining." Harry smiled thankfully at Thia.

"What did you guys think?" Harry asked the group as a whole.

"It's confusing," Cho replied instantly. "I wasn't sure who was on my team and I couldn't figure out what everyone was doing." Harry nodded.

"It was an adrenaline rush," Ginny answered. "I was able to cast spells without any difficulty that normally are a problem for me."

"Okay, anything else?" Harry asked again. When nothing was forthcoming, he turned to Ron's group. "You guys had a good plan. You didn't worry too much about captives you took, but you made

sure to rescue your own. What you needed to do was during a jailbreak, nip over and grab the enemy's flag. Take your last jailbreak on my team's side. You had five people over here, plus one person who had rescued everyone. That's half your team. With the three members of that group," Harry said pointing to Hermione's group, "there was mass chaos. All you need to do was send one person and they would have had the flag."

"But if you knew that, you'd have gotten us," Ron told Harry.

"But I was breaking free my team members from Hermione's jail," Harry explained. "You had us outnumbered on our own turf. Four of my team on Hermione's turf, three on your turf. That leaves five on my turf and they were trying to re-capture nine." Ron nodded.

"And, Hermione, your group had a good plan if your team had a few more members," Harry said. "You wasted too much of your manpower protecting captives. That's how Ron's group managed to get your flag. Freeing your captive teammates and guarding your flag is more important than guarding the jail; though that was a great tactic to get your flag back. Too bad it was ruined by a fluke." Hermione nodded bitterly. Ginny had twisted her ankle while, well, walking. Harry smiled at his girlfriend.

"What about your group?" someone asked.

"They did pretty okay, if you ask me," Harry responded. "We got lucky that both flags were kept at the same spot. Two people concentrated on rescuing captive team members, five on guarding our flag, and five on capturing your flags. We could have been a little better at sneaking around your guys' turf, but it wasn't too bad."

"How did you notice all that?" Susan asked, impressed.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked confused. Thia let out one laugh before Remus clamped a hand over her mouth. "Thanks," he said to the man.

"I barely knew what I was doing, let alone what my own team was up to," Cho replied. "I had no idea whatsoever what the other teams were up to until it was too late."

Harry blushed slightly. "Oh, it's just, well, I've learnt, I mean," he started, but closed his mouth before he gave Thia a better reason to laugh. He hated when someone pointed out something extra that he had learnt in his outside studies.

"I've been learning how to see everything," Harry explained. "It's really rather boring, training that is, but it's loads of help. Thia, stop it," Harry told the witch. "I thought you were an adult." Remus let out a short laugh that got him an elbow in the stomach. "Thia," Harry said again in warning.

"Sorry," she said without actually meaning it.

"Just think of the example you're setting," Harry said, trying to hide his smile. He knew he'd get her to bite.

"Ladies, do not let your brothers, older or younger, laugh at you," Thia said in her "teacher" voice. "A good elbow to the stomach can do wonders for your relationship with them." McGonagall looked at her in slight disapproval. "But then again," she said back-tracking quickly, "you really shouldn't hurt your brothers or anyone else for that matter. Especially when you have such wo—"

"Don't say anything you'll regret, Thia," Remus told her with a smile.

"Okay, if you two are done disrupting my class," Harry said, thankful to have authority in the matter, "I'd like to continue." Thia nodded, glancing nervously between McGonagall and Remus. "Today we were evenly split. Next week, we'll split into four even groups. The week after will be two equal groups. The two weeks after that will be groups of different numbers and different terrains. And then the week after them, well, what do you guys think of having an extra long practice? I have a surprise for you all. But we'll need more time."

"How much time?" Blaise asked curiously.

"The more the better," Harry answered. "Ideally three or four hours." There were some groans. "What else are you going to be doing the week after exams?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Zacharias Smith answered. "It's fine with me. Just as long as we don't go past curfew." There were several nods of agreement. Harry smiled.

"Well, we'll talk about it closer to the date. Until next week, have a good time."

"What did you say?" Voldemort said calmly. Rookwood was shaking in fear.

"I'm not sure if it's a weapon, my Lord," he answered terrified.

"The legends clearly say it is a weapon, Rookwood," Voldemort said softly. "Are you saying that I can not read?"

"No, Master," he croaked out. Voldemort sent a force that slammed the man into the wall. Rookwood clawed at an invisible hand around his neck. The other Death Eaters watched in terrified silence. Harry watched in horrified silence, his scar bursting with pain. Finally the man fell to the ground, breathing quickly and greedily.

"Explain yourself, Rookwood, and keep it short and to the point," Voldemort said in a falsely bored tone.

"I found another legend, my Lord, and it mentioned it as a charm to remember the past," Rookwood hurriedly explained. "It didn't say anything about it being a weapon. Ravenclaw's granddaughter wrote the text herself. It's more reliable than the legend we have now."

"Is that so?" Voldemort said in a tone that Rookwood should have caught onto.

"Yes, my Lord," the man said earnestly. "It actually poked fun at the legends surrounding it that said it was a powerful weapon."

"Is that so?"

This time Rookwood heard the tone and blanched to a deathly white. "My Lord, no disrespect was meant..." He trailed off, knowing that his fate was already sealed.

"Do you think that maybe Ravenclaw's granddaughter was lying to throw those such as ourselves off the scent?" Voldemort asked rhetorically. "Protecting herself and those that came after her? Rookwood, I'm rather disappointed. Goodbye."

"No, my Lord!" he cried out in one final plea for life.

"Avada Kedavra!" Rookwood fell the short few feet to the ground, dead before he hit. Dead, in fact, before he had even started to fall.

"Harry! Are you alright, mate?" Ron yelled as Harry tried to untangle himself from his sheets. He had fallen out of bed and that was what had woken him up.

"I'm fine, Ron," Harry said as calmly as he could. He was shaking and he tried to hide it from his worried roommates. Neville got out of his bed and helped Harry untangle himself. "Thanks, Neville. I'll be right back," he said to the others and then sprinted to the bathroom. He barely made it in time, but, as he stared at the contents in the toilet, he had made it. He wiped his mouth off and flushed the toilet. He rinsed out his mouth, looking at himself in the mirror.

He looked horribly pale. His scar stood out on his white forehead, red as blood. His hands wouldn't stop shaking. Actually, his whole body was trembling. Why had that bothered him so much? Because Rookwood didn't deserve to die, Harry answered his own question. Not like that at least.

Harry couldn't believe that Voldemort would just kill his followers like that. It was disturbing. No wonder Blaise had picked this side. That was no life to live. Always afraid you'll piss Voldemort off, afraid that he'll kill you or your family. Harry made his way back to the dormitory.

"Did you make it?" Ron asked without looking at Harry.

"Yeah," Harry said, staring at his messed up sheets. "I'm going to go down to the common room to think; why don't you guys go back to sleep?"

"And let you deal with that on your own? No way, Harry," Dean said getting out of bed. He pulled out a stash of chocolate. "Let's eat our way through this. It's bound to make you feel better." Harry nodded and started opening a Chocolate Frog. Five frogs later, Ron decided to open his mouth.

"What did you see?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry said around a mouth full of chocolate. "It doesn't matter," he lied. Ron sensed that and gave him a severe glare. "All right. Voldemort got pissed off at one of the Death Eaters, Rookwood actually. He killed him." There was stunned silence as the other boys just stared. "Like I said, it doesn't matter. No one innocent died." Harry knew that Ron knew that this was really bothering him, but Ron kept his mouth shut this time.

There was a long silence as everyone ate the frogs. Finally, Neville looked over at Harry. Harry just ignored the look and continued eating. "So your next game is a week from tomorrow," Neville finally said. Harry nodded. "Are you guys ready?"

"Of course we are, Neville," Ron answered. "We have been for ages."

"Did you guys hear about the Harpies taking the league title, without losing once?" Seamus asked. "Completely undefeated. Hasn't happened in like 50 years."

"It's kinda hard not to have heard when I'm dating their biggest fan," Harry grumbled good-naturally. "At least it's better than hearing about the Chudley Cannons. No offense, Neville."

"None taken," Neville replied.

"Well, I took some offense," Ron said heatedly. "First you insult my sister, then you insult my team. What next, Potter?" Harry laughed.

“Well,” Harry said trying not to laugh too hard, “you know a certain bushy haired girl in our year freaked out earlier this week. I guess she just realized that our N.E.W.T.’s are a year and two weeks away.” The boys all started laughing. Hermione had a major melt down during the D.A. meeting on Wednesday. This started every fifth and seventh year throwing hexes and various items at her.

“I know, but where would we be without her?” Ron asked with a huge smile on his face.

“Well, we would be stuck in Devil’s Snare, old bones by now,” Harry said seriously. “And even if we had managed to get past that, I’d have drunk the wrong potion, and even if I had managed to get through that, I’d have failed every single exam, along with you.” Ron nodded in agreement.

“Dang, you owe a lot to Hermione,” Dean said softly.

“Oh yeah,” Harry answered. “You couldn’t ask for a better know-it-all for a best friend, right Ron?” Ron’s ears turned a wonderful crimson. “See, Ron thinks so too!” The boys laughed at Ron and continued going through the chocolate. Harry pulled out his stash and added it to the pile, along with Seamus, Neville, and Ron. As Harry started to feel tired again, he saw something that nearly gave him a heart attack. It succeeded in completely waking him up.

“What you got there, Harry?” Ron asked, seeing Harry’s stunned face. Harry shook his head and tried to hide the card he was looking at. “Give it here, Harry,” Ron commanded. Harry didn’t, so Ron decided to tackle Harry. They wrestled for control of it until, finally, Ron laughed with triumph. He settled back and smiled at Harry in an annoying fashion. Then he looked at the card.

“Bloody hell!”

“What is it?” Seamus asked the stunned boy. Harry was now blushing furiously.

“It’s nothing,” Harry said, hoping that they’d let it drop.

"It's not nothing, Harry," Dean said, snatching the card from Ron's fingers. "Bloody hell!" Dean said, repeating Ron. "I don't believe this. Look at this Seamus, Neville."

Seamus and Neville moved over and looked at what Dean held in his hand. All three stared at it in disbelief and then simultaneously looked at Harry. He was staring at them, not really seeing them. He couldn't believe what Dean now held. It just wasn't right.

Harry Potter

CURRENTLY SIXTH YEAR AT HOGWARTS

As the Boy Who Lived, Harry Potter won his way into our hearts when You-Know-Who killed James and Lily Potter, leaving him an orphan.

His most notable accomplishments include surviving the Killing Curse, winning the Triwizard Tournament, escaping from You-Know-Who after

he returned to his body, and challenging You-Know-Who before Christmas last. Harry Potter enjoys playing Quidditch and spending time with

his friends and housemates.

"Ah, that's nice of you, Harry," Dean said sweetly. "You like spending time with us."

"Shut it and give that here," Harry said angrily. "How do they know what I like to do? It's not like they asked me." He took the card and tore it in half.

"That's bloody brilliant, Harry," Ron complained. "I was going to give that to Ginny for her birthday. I'd even frame it for her." Harry felt his temper rise. He took a deep breath and counted to ten.

"I don't know why they made a card of me," Harry told them, holding his temper in check. "But do not say a word to anyone about it. I don't want the added attention." Harry looked each of the boys in the eye. "Not a word." They nodded; though, Ron wouldn't look him in the eyes afterwards. Ron had better not tell Ginny, or he'd never hear the end of it.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Year Ends

Though endings are never, ever happy,
It's the happy moments along the way
That in the end
Make it...
ok...

Five For Fighting: Nobody

To Harry's horror, the whole school knew that he had his own chocolate frog card by Monday. Several people who didn't know him well thought he was just looking for more attention. Others who didn't know him well went out of their way to congratulate him. Those who did know him told him to ignore it and forget about it. He smiled gratefully at each of the D.A. members as they said similar things to him.

The week passed in a flurry of meetings, classes, and practices. Harry was looking forward to the weekend. It was his last Quidditch game of the season and he had not, as of the moment, spent anytime in the infirmary for Quidditch-related reasons.

The last practice went well in Harry's opinion, though Katie was a little more frantic. He had a feeling that it was just the stress of N.E.W.T.'s and the final game. There really was no other reason to be concerned. Even with the Ravenclaw team scouting them out, Harry felt confident in his chasers. They were the best in the school. They would set the pace of the game. Then there were the beaters. Harry smiled. Sloper and Kirke were getting really talented. By their seventh year, they'd be as good (if not better) than the Weasley twins.

The only drawback to that Saturday's game was the weather. All week it had rained. This, in Neville's opinion, was just fine, they hadn't had rain in a long time and the plants needed it. But, in Harry's opinion, it was horrible. He absolutely, without a doubt, hated playing in the rain. And everyone on the team felt the same way.

"You never know," Natalie commented, as she dried off her hair after practice, "it just might stop by Saturday."

"I doubt it," Ron said pessimistically. "That's in two days and it doesn't look like it's almost done."

"Less than two days, really," Sloper chimed in sadly. "More like 36 hours."

"I hate being wet," Ginny grumbled.

"At least it isn't cold," Harry reminded them. "It could be worse." He really wanted to join in, but he had to keep their spirits up, as a captain and all. "Any last words before they leave, Katie?"

"No," she answered in a short tone.

"Okay then," Harry said turning back to them. "Stay clear of Katie or she'll bite your head off." Katie threw her towel at him. "See what I mean? Go inside and get something warm to eat. Go to bed at a reasonable time Friday night. And get ready to kick some Ravenclaw butt." The team left, pulling their cloaks close.

"I hate this," Katie told him.

"I hate the rain too, but what can we do?" Harry asked. Katie looked at him in surprise.

"That's not what I meant," she answered. "This is my last game. I'm not going to play professional Quidditch, so I'll never play so competitively again. And it's against Cho. I've been playing against her forever. I want to win so bad." Her grip on her broom tightened, and Harry found himself hoping she didn't break it.

"I'm with you on that," Harry said with a smile. "We'll be fine, Katie. Just don't think about all of that. It's a normal game and you'll play again. I know you, Katie. You'll probably end up joining some local league. Let's get inside, before Ron eats all the food." Katie smiled, and they walked up to the castle. By the time they were safely in the castle, they were sopping wet.

"I hate rain," Harry and Katie grumbled at the same time. They laughed and went to sit with their friends in the Great Hall. There was a bright flash of lightning across the ceiling, causing heads to look up. Thunder boomed, filling the Hall with its echoes.

"Great," Harry grumbled with Ron and Ginny. "Just great."

"It might blow itself out by Saturday," Hermione told them hopefully.

It didn't, of course. Saturday dawned, but you couldn't tell that it had. It was extremely dark out. The rain was falling in buckets and thunder boomed in the distance. We started the season in rain, Harry complained to himself, and we'll finish the season in rain.

The team headed down to the Great Hall together and ate together. Katie had a hard time eating, but the rest of the team forced the food into her. Half an hour before the game was to start, they headed down to the Quidditch Stadium. They changed into their Quidditch robes and congregated, waiting for Katie's pep talk. She started pacing back and forth, but she didn't say anything. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Okay, so Katie's not Wood, which you should all be thankful for," Harry started. "He had the worse, most predictable pep talks around. So, instead you get to hear mine. Let's win this game for our seventh year captain. Let's win and take the Cup." Several people nodded. "And anyway, I don't want to let the Ravenclaws win it. They've been trash talking for weeks. Let's shove everything they've said in their faces."

"Okay," Katie managed out. "Let's get out there." The team walked down the tunnel and out into the rain. "I hate rain!" Katie complained to the sky. In return, it started to pour harder. They walked to the center of the pitch and waited for the Ravenclaw team to join them. After several moments of waiting, they walked out.

"Shake hands," Madame Hooch told the captains. Harry shook Cho's hand first, followed by Katie. "I want a nice fair game, you hear. All right then, on three. One. Two. Three." She tossed the quaffle into the air and Harry zoomed into the air, searching for the snitch.

"Katie Bell, seventh year Gryffindor and one of their captains, takes possession of the quaffle. She passes to Ginny Weasley, youngest of a talented family. Oh, that had to hurt," Dean's voice rang out over the rain. Harry spun around to see what had happened to his girlfriend. It seemed that she'd gotten hit in the face with a bludger. "So, Mandy Brocklehurst with the quaffle. She passes to Morag McDougal. Morag takes it to the goal. Oh, nice try by the Gryffindor beater, Kirke. It just missed him. And Morag prepares to shoot. That's Natalie MacDonald, people. Current second year."

Harry smiled as Natalie zoomed towards the Ravenclaw goal. She was one vicious, but clean, chaser who had just wrestled the quaffle from Morag. Harry turned to find Cho, the smile still on his face. She was flying on the other side of the pitch. Harry frowned, so she wasn't going to follow him. Too bad, he had been practicing his diving just for her.

"So that makes the score, 10-0 Gryffindor. Brocklehurst with the quaffle. She passes to Morag. Morag takes it forward. He passes to Orla Quirke. Quirke passes it to Brocklehurst, but it never makes it to her. Bell with the quaffle now. She passes to MacDonald. MacDonald to Weasley, back to Bell and... BELL SCORES! 20-0 Gryffindor!" Harry smiled for only a split second, and then took off to the other side of the pitch. Cho was already racing to reach the snitch. Harry could barely see, but it was there. He hoped his beaters noticed and sent a... Harry pulled out of his dash, avoiding a collision with a Ravenclaw chaser. It didn't matter; Cho was cradling her left arm, hurt by a bludger. Kirke had such good aim.

"Well, that search came up fruitless, folks. Brocklehurst shoots and... That was a wonderful save by Ron Weasley. Weasley passes to Weasley and she takes off. What's Potter up to?" Harry was shouting at the crowd, after the snitch. He turned to the left sharply, following it. It reversed its direction and shot passed his ear. He missed it, but was still on its trail. By this time Cho was next to him.

The snitch went right; Harry followed it with little problem. Cho couldn't take the turn at her high velocity and so she lost control of her broom. Harry smiled. This snitch was his. The snitch dove to the

ground and Harry followed it, thankful that he was able to dive. The snitch went right, parallel with and a few feet above the ground. Harry pulled out of his dive before he hit the ground. He shot after it, Cho with him again.

The snitch headed straight up, going even faster. Harry was glad he had a Firebolt as Cho lost ground on him and the snitch. Harry shot up at it, high above the game. As he was staring up at the snitch, a bolt of lightning shot across the sky. Harry blinked, trying to clear his sight. He dove and leveled off when he felt he was at playing height. "Timeout!" he called, making the motion with his hands. "Time out!" He heard Madam Hooch's whistle.

"WHAT'S UP WITH POTTER? THEY WERE ABOUT TO SCORE!" Dean's voice shouted over the noise of hundreds of boo's from the Gryffindor supporters.

"What's the meaning of this, Potter?" Katie's angry voice reached him. He turned to where he thought she was and started to speak.

"I can't see!" he shouted to them over a clap of thunder. "I was staring at the snitch when lightning shot across the sky. I need to get my sight back!"

"You can't see?" Ginny asked worriedly. He nodded. He rubbed his eyes and started to blink furiously. "What do we do if he doesn't get his sight back?"

"We move you to Seeker, Gin," Harry said. "I'll stay on the pitch, just in case I get my sight back. Does anyone know a spell to help clear my vision?" Nobody did. "Damn!"

"Are you ready?" Madam Hooch asked, coming over to speak to them.

"We'd like to make a player switch, Madam Hooch," Katie said as Harry nodded. "Ginny Weasley's going to be our Seeker and Harry Potter's taking her spot as Chaser."

"I'll inform the other team and the score table," Madame Hooch said before flying away.

"Can you see any better?" Ron asked nervously. They'd be down a Chaser and have a Seeker that hadn't trained as one in over a year.

"No," he answered frustrated. "Here, Gin, let's switch brooms. Lead me to the ground." She nodded and took his hand.

"We're three feet from the ground, luv," she said to him. He dismounted and Ginny handed him her broom. "Be nice to her," she told him. "And stay out of harm's way."

"Gryffindor has a player change!" Dean shouted. "Ginny Weasley's taking the Seeker spot and Harry Potter's taking the Chaser spot. And look at that, they're changing brooms. What happened to Potter?" It was the question everyone was asking.

"I'm staying down here," Harry told her. "I wish I knew a spell to get my sight back."

"Me too, luv," Ginny responded, before pecking him on the cheek. "Don't get hurt!" And she flew off. Harry heard Madam Hooch's whistle again and play started. Harry felt useless just sitting there (well, technically he was flying, but that's beyond the point) and not searching for the snitch. He listened to Dean's commentary, not even able to watch it for himself.

"Well, Gryffindor is down a Chaser it seems. Potter's sticking low to the ground. Doesn't matter, Ginny Wesley's a fine Seeker. Bell has the quaffle, she passes to MacDonald. MacDonald passes to Bell, who shoots and.... Scores! 110-70 Gryffindor!" Harry cheered for his team. "Brocklehurst with the quaffle and gets hit by a nice bludger from Sloper! Bell swoops down and snatches it up—"

"What's the matter, Harry?" Hermione's voice said behind him.

"I can't see," Harry responded.

"Well, I couldn't tell that," Hermione said waspishly. "You're staring like a blind man. How did it happen?"

"POTTER WATCH OUT FOR THE BLUDGER!" Dean yelled in warning.

"Move to your right, Harry, and quickly!" Hermione screamed at him at the same time Dean had. Harry did and felt the air ripple from the bludger pass by his right side.

"Sorry about that, Harry," Sloper apologized. "I lost track of this one. It won't happen again."

"I hope not," Harry mumbled angrily. "What did you ask?" he asked Hermione.

"What happened?" she re-asked.

"I was looking at the sky when lightning blinded me," Harry replied. "Can you think of something that would get my vision back?"

"NICE SAVE, RON!" Dean screamed, cheering his roommate on. "Weasley passes it to Bell. Hey, the other Weasley's diving for the snitch. Cho's right on her tail. Ginny's heading straight down to the ground."

"Wronski Feint," Harry said smiling. "Gin's been dying to do that to Cho!" Harry was right.

"Oh, that had to hurt," Dean said, grimacing. "Cho fell for a Potter specialty. He must have taught it to Ginny Weasley on one of their dates. As you all know, Potter and—"

"DEAN THOMAS, we do not need to know about their personal lives!" McGonagall shouted at the boy.

"Sorry, Professor. Bell scored during the wonderful Feint done by Weasley. So that makes it 130-110, Gryffindor!"

"Harry, what's the counter spell for the Avelgule spell?" Hermione asked excitedly. Harry furrowed his brow deep in thought. What was the counter spell? Another clap of thunder rumbled. The rain poured down, hitting Harry on the head. He ran a hand through his wet,

tangled hair. He needed a haircut. This is neither the time nor the place to think of that, you idiot! Harry chided himself.

"I can't think of it," he shouted up to Hermione.

"I'm right next to you, Harry," she told him. Harry mumbled an apology and rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. Wait! I had a way to remember this one... What is it? Glasses, spectacles, Spectio! That's it!

"I remember it!" he told Hermione. "Spectio! Now what?"

"Try to use it," she informed him. "If it doesn't work, put the Avelgule curse on yourself and then take it off. I think that'll work."

"Thanks, Hermione, you are a lifesaver," he said to her.

"Don't mention it," Hermione said. Harry cast the seeing charm and of course Hermione was right. He could see again. And what he saw made his stomach flip. Cho was diving for the snitch and Ginny had just been hit by a bludger. He couldn't catch the snitch until he was the seeker again, but he could distract Cho.

Harry took off, flying straight at Cho. The snitch turned and started to make its way to Harry. And the one time the snitch flies to me I can't catch it! Harry was now flying directly at Cho, who was flying right at him. The game of chicken was on and Harry wasn't going to pull out until the absolute last second.

Cho looked at him, surprised and furious. She gripped her broom tighter and barreled at Harry. Harry just smiled and continued flying. The snitch went past his ear and continued behind him. Cho, now only a few feet away, looked even more surprised. She had expected him to catch the snitch. She rolled to the right the second Harry sped past her.

"Time out!" Harry bellowed, catching Hooch's attention. As Harry and Ginny went to switch brooms, Katie told Madam Hooch that Harry was once again the Seeker.

"I told you not to get hurt and not to be hard on my broom!" Ginny yelled at him. Harry just smiled. "I'm going to keep yours if you're not careful."

"Over my dead body, Gin, give her here!" Harry held his hand out for his broom. Ginny gave it to him, grabbing hers. "Much better," he said, running a loving hand along the handle.

"Guys and brooms," Ginny said rolling her eyes. She raced up to their team and Harry followed. "Nice scaring Cho out of her mind," Ginny told Harry.

"Nice Feint! Or it sounded nice to me," Harry replied with a smile. Ginny really didn't like his "ex-girlfriend", and Harry found their little fight amusing.

"Okay, Ravenclaw took the lead, 140-180, so we need to take control again," Katie said quickly. "Sorry about leaving you out to dry like that, Ron, but two chasers aren't enough." Ron shrugged, he had stopped more than he had let in. "Harry catch that snitch, I want to get dry and start celebrating."

"Aye, aye, captain," Harry said with a smile. "Your mum is here, Gin," Harry added. He had been looking for Hermione when the section of red heads caught his eye. Bill, Charlie, and Mrs. Weasley were sitting with Hermione. He felt himself missing the twins. They'd normally be here to watch, he thought sadly.

"Ready?" Madam Hooch asked them. Katie nodded and the team broke apart. Katie took the quaffle and play resumed. Harry listened to Dean as he continued searching for the snitch.

"Weasley passes to MacDonald. Nice bludger work by Kirke, clearing the way for MacDonald to... SCORE! 150-180 Ravenclaw. Nice to have Weasley back as chaser for Gryffindor. Morag passes to Brocklehurst, Brocklehurst to Quirke. Quirke back to Morag... and Morag misses. Weasley passes to Bell—"

Cho was tailing him now. Harry decided that it was time to take her on a wild goose hunt. He took off at high speed, only slightly angled

to the ground. "Potter sees the snitch!" Dean roared, much to Harry's pleasure. That would get Cho's attention. Cho turned and started to follow him and Harry had to smile. He turned directions, going to his left and into a steeper dive. Cho followed, not knowing where the snitch was. Harry changed directions again, heading up and to the right. Cho was catching up; she should have realized that her broom wouldn't be able to do that. Then Harry dove, straight at the ground. And Cho followed. Harry felt his smile grow as he pulled out of the dive in time for Cho to hit.

"That was one elaborate Feint!" Dean called out. "Wait, Potter's at it again only this can't be a Feint, Cho's not back in the air!" Harry had seen the snitch as he pulled out of his dive. It was behind the Ravenclaw goal posts. He shot at it, ignoring everything. He wanted out of the rain! He would later pay for that.

He shot through the goal hoop and latched his fingers around the snitch in triumph. And then five things hit him in quick succession. Two bludgers, only one sent by the Ravenclaw beater Michael Corner, hit him. One broke his left arm; the other shattered his right shin. Then the quaffle, thrown by Ginny, hit the back of his head. She throws hard! was all Harry had time to think before the bludgers came back for more. One rammed into his chest and the other hit him in the same spot the quaffle had hit just moments before.

He didn't remember hitting the ground.

"Is he alright?" Molly Weasley asked as soon as she entered the infirmary. Professor McGonagall walked over to her quickly.

"Poppy doesn't want anyone to bother her as she fixes him up," Minerva said tersely. "She says he'll be fine as long as she's able to work."

"He has to be in a bad way," Molly continued, her hand griping Bill's tightly.

"He's been in worse," Minerva answered tightly. "Poppy already fixed up his leg and ribs. I guess there's still internal damage to his lungs, but otherwise his chest's fine."

"And his head?" Charlie asked quietly. Molly looked at him. "Most Quidditch related deaths are blows to the head." Molly felt the tears come unbidden to her eyes. How she absolutely hated crying!

"That's what Poppy's dealing with now," Minerva said angrily, glaring daggers at her old student. Molly smiled warmly. Minerva had been such a help for each of her boys at one time or the other. "She said he'll be out cold for a few days, but once he's regained consciousness he'll be fine. Don't worry, Molly, Harry will be fine. He always is."

Molly smiled at her old friend. Minerva knew exactly what to say. "Though I'd be more worried about your son," Minerva continued. "Poppy yelled at him and the team for bothering her, and as he was leaving he was getting an earful from a very angry sister."

"Not from his girlfriend?" Bill asked with a laugh.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Minerva said, all traces of a smile gone. "Hermione was bidding her time. That's never a good sign."

"What's the Gryffindor password?" Molly asked knowing that her son might need rescuing. Neither of the girls would be very happy for being kicked out.

"I think it's 'The Weasley Twins Live', but I'm not sure about that," Minerva said vaguely. "Ron has been known to forget that passwords need to be cleared through me, so it might have been changed. Try 'Victory Is Ours' if that fails or something like that."

"Or something like 'Save Me'," Bill added with a smile. "Particularly if the girls are chewing him out."

"Oh, there you are, Minerva," Poppy said coming around a curtain toward the end of the hall. "Oh, Molly, would you like to see the Potter boy?" Molly nodded. Ron could fend for himself. He'd been dealing with Ginny for years, and he had decided to go out with Hermione. Harry though, he hadn't done anything to deserve this stay in the

hospital wing. Well, that last Feint might have deserved one bludger, but not four.

“Can you believe that Mum just deserted her own flesh and blood to sit up with his best friend?” Molly heard Bill ask Charlie as they walked out of the infirmary.

“Yes, but the students might not have been too thrilled about her wrecking the party,” Charlie said as the door snapped shut. Molly smiled as she took a seat next to Harry. Ron would understand. And Charlie was right, she shouldn’t disrupt the party. Heavens knew that those kids deserved to have a party. This war was taking its toll on them the most.

“He’s a complete git,” Ginny said angrily, pointing at Harry. Hermione smiled faintly, the sun reflecting off her hair. “I need to be studying, but what am I doing instead? I’m watching him, looking for any signs of life!” Ginny sat in a huff. Ron had just left and Hermione just continued smiling. It made Ginny even angrier and she stood again. “Seriously, Hermione! Don’t laugh at me! I told him not to get hurt and he went and got himself hurt!”

“Miss Weasley,” Madame Pomfrey’s crisp tone interjected. “Do I need to ask you to leave? I told you that you could stay as long as you don’t bother my patient,” she finished waving a hand at Harry’s unconscious form.

“I don’t think anything could bother Harry at the moment,” Ginny replied. “I told him to stay safe, and look!” Ginny sat again. Why does Harry do this to me all the time?

Ginny rested her head in her hands and at the moment was staring at the floor, so she missed the look that passed between Hermione and Pomfrey. She was so worried for Harry. He’d taken a bludger to the chest and the head. Not to mention the one to the arm and the shin. It was Sunday evening, she had her Charms O.W.L. the next day and she should be studying. What was she doing here?

“You may stay as long as you don’t disrupt me,” Madame Pomfrey finally said, leaving with a faint smile on her lips.

"Why are you so bloody humored by this?" Ginny screamed in annoyance. "I, personally, see nothing humorous about Harry lying on his bed in the infirmary unconscious and me at my wits end! It's like you all find it funny that I'm pulling my hair out, skipping the studying that I need to do, and watching my boyfriend's unconscious form. I find nothing humorous with this! Maybe you just enjoy my ire!"

"But I do," Harry croaked out. Ginny sat back down. When did I stand up? she asked herself vaguely. She had a hand at her heart; trying desperately to get over the shock Harry had just given her. "Sorry, luv," he said abashed. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"How long have you been awake?" Ginny asked quietly. She wanted to go sit on his bed or in the chair next to his bed, but she didn't think her legs would be able to support her.

"I remember being called a git a few times," Harry said with a huge smile at Ginny. "If you need to go study, by all means, go study."

"I only called you a git once," Ginny defended herself angrily. No one got away with talking down to her like that. She stood and angrily walked over to him. "But I'll list off all the names that fit if you'd like."

"By all means, do," Harry said with that annoying smile. Did he have a death wish?

"You're a git, a prat, an annoying little prick," Ginny started, holding up a finger with each name. "An idiot, a jerk, a dweeb, a very stupid boy, a horrible liar. Did I mention that you're a git?" Ginny asked for emphasis. Hermione was now laughing, hard. Ginny sent her a scathing glare, but all that managed was to make Hermione laugh more. She turned back to Harry and he was playing sorry.

"I'm sorry for being me," Harry answered a tone that Ginny knew was faked. "I'll try not to be a git, prat, a prick, an idiot, a jerk, a very stupid boy, and a horrible liar. But, Gin, that's what I am." Ginny laughed as Harry swept her into a hug. "But if I'm such a horrible liar, how come you fell for that?" Ginny hit him over the head and struggled out of his grasp.

"I ought to—" Ginny warned, but she didn't want to stay angry with Harry. He was awake, finally, he was smiling, and he was hers. "Oh, never mind. I'm the one that started this." She looked down at him. He was hers, and she liked that.

"Yeah, that quaffle hurt more than all the bludgers combined," Harry told her impishly, rubbing the back of his head for emphasis.

"Sorry, 'bout that," Ginny answered without a trace of true apology. "But you did scare me, shooting past me like that. I can't help it that I threw the quaffle at you. And don't ever make me be Seeker again. It's so boring."

"You seemed to enjoying sending Cho into the ground," Harry said with a smile. Ginny smiled weakly, finally feeling a bit embarrassed for her actions. "But Michael was the Beater who got me, right?" Ginny nodded. "Well, there we go. He got me back for what you did to my ex-girlfriend who's now his."

"I never realized that she was your girlfriend," Hermione replied innocently. "I mean, one snog and a horrible date can't really count as going out, can it?"

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked, for the first time noticing the absence of his best friend. "I thought he'd be here or with Hermione."

"Don't change the subject," Ginny told him, giving him the smile she knew he loved. "I never knew you thought Cho was your girlfriend."

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked again. Ginny noticed the slight panic in his voice and she walked over to him quickly. "Why won't you tell me where he is?"

"It's not that we don't want to or can't, luv," Ginny told him calmly. She ran her fingers through his hair. She knew he loved it when she played with his hair and she enjoyed doing it. "I just want to finish this conversation about Cho and then we'll tell you."

“Why are you so worried, Harry?” Hermione asked nervously. Ginny watched Harry look away. “He’s alright, right?” Hermione asked again.

“He left right before I woke up?” Harry asked and Ginny nodded. “Yeah, he’s fine. It was just a dream. Why don’t you go get your Charms books and I’ll help you study, Gin.” Ginny got up and Hermione went with her. At the door Ginny turned back.

“You should read that book,” she said point to his bedside table.

Harry smiled as the door closed shut. He loved it when Ginny worked herself into a huff. She got so angry and said some pretty amusing things. He picked up the journal and said the password. He flipped past the halfway point and found her letter. They’d need a new book before long.

Dear Luv,

DO NOT EVER DO THIS TO ME AGAIN! JUST BECAUSE I TELL YOU THAT IT’S GOOD TO GET SENT TO THE INFIRMARY INSTEAD OF ST. MUNGO’S DOESN’T MEAN I CONDONE IT! DON’T DO THIS AGAIN!

Okay, done with the rant. Though I’m not sorry. It felt rather good, ‘cause I know I’ll never have the guts to say that to your face for a long while.

That was a great game! I really don’t like Seeker, but it felt so good to send Cho into the ground. Don’t hate me for it, but you should have heard some of the things she said about you last year. And you know me: we Weasley women don’t let go of grudges easily! And watching you take her on that chase... Priceless.

I wish you could have seen her face! It was great. She was covered in mud, head to toe, and furious. Even as you fell unconscious, she was glowering at you. But then again, you were unconscious, so you couldn’t have seen that. Have I mentioned that I don’t want you to end up in the infirmary ever again?

Can you believe the weather today? Sunny, just a few clouds, warm, light breeze. Why couldn't yesterday have been like that? I hate playing in rainstorms like that! I can handle a drizzle, but that storm was unbelievable. And the lightning blinded you. I wish we could go for a walk around the lake. It's a perfect day for it!

I'm soooooo nervous for the O.W.L.'s the next two weeks. Hermione has been complaining that you've done more studying for my O.W.L.'s than you did for you own. And I've told her that you're just trying to help me. She then said that you had a saving-people problem and I said, yes you did, but that's why I love you. Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but just shook her head. A little later she said that your saving-people thing was what made you so great. Which is as close as anyone will ever hear Hermione Granger come to saying that she was wrong.

Do you think I'll do fine on my O.W.L.'s? I don't think so, but if Ron can get as many O.W.L.'s as he did, I should be fine, right? I mean, I've studied more, I take better notes, I'm slightly smarter, or rather, I just apply myself more than he does at my studies. I can't do worse than the twins, no matter what happens.

Hey, that reminds me of two things. One, you missed a great party last night. It was fantastic, though it would have been better if we weren't all worried about our favorite Seeker. You should have heard Dean go on about your timeout and then your amazing Feint and then your graceful fall.

But Bill and Charlie came half way through and, well, we had a great time. And they told us that the healers expect Fred and George to be released the weekend after exams are done! They really wanted to come to the game, but Healer Lemon said no. And they listened! I can't believe that!

I really can't wait 'til school's done and you're at Grimmauld with us! This summer will be great! Well, it'd be great if we could go outside sometimes.... The roof will have to do, though I do want to play some Quidditch or just fly with you.

I miss the Burrow already! I wonder how long it'll take for the grounds to become decontaminated. Maybe I'll be able to live there when I'm old and gray. Or not. Who knows? I just wished we could have spent break there with the twins joking around. At least they'll be fine in a while.

Well, have a good time suffering alone this evening! I am GOING to study, no matter what you say!

Yours forever,

Ginny

Harry sat, staring at the letter in disbelief. His eyes kept returning to one line. "But that's why I love you." Certainly she didn't mean 'I want to live with you the rest of your life' kind of love. She must have meant 'he's a great boyfriend and an even better friend that I can't live without somewhere in my life', because he couldn't picture such a great girl loving him enough to spend her whole life with him. She was way more than he deserved and she did deserve so much more than he was.

He didn't care that much one way or the other at the moment. They'd figure it out sometime in the distant future. And he'd figure out exactly what he felt for her at that vague point in time. Right now, he was figuring out how to keep Ginny here for most of the evening. Well, he could always help her study, but she should study with someone from her year. And that's when Luna entered the room.

Harry cleared the Journal quickly and set it on the table. Luna wore her normal vacant expression. She seemed to be in another world. He felt a smile curl his lips up as he recognized her butterbeer cap necklace. She was an odd one, Luna was, but there wasn't anything wrong with that.

"Hello, Luna," Harry said to her when she got closer. Luna nodded slowly and took a seat next to Harry. "How's your reviewing for O.W.L.'s coming?"

"Oh, fine," Luna replied. "How's your leg?" Harry looked at her strangely. Of all his injuries from Saturday's game, that was the least of his worries.

"Fine," Harry told her. "Pomfrey fixed it up quick." Luna turned to look at him for the first time.

"Are you sure about that?" she asked, picking up the Journal. She opened it and started paging through it. "It's good that you write in here," she told him vacantly.

"I haven't written in that yet," Harry responded. What was she talking about? It's not like she could see the writing. She gave him a piercing glance. The door to the infirmary opened again and Ginny entered with a book bag filled with books and notes. She stopped when she saw Luna talking to Harry, the Journal in her hands. A second later, Ginny started forward again, smiling at Luna.

"Hey, Luna," Ginny said cheerfully. "You ready for the Charms exam tomorrow?"

"Not really," Luna answered with a smile. "I was hoping you'd want to study with me. Everyone from my house already had someone to study with."

"Sure," Ginny replied. "As long as Harry doesn't mind."

"Well, Harry doesn't mind as long as you stay," Harry replied in third person.

"I'm not going anywhere," Ginny promised him.

Harry was released from the infirmary Monday, minutes before supper started. He hurried down and took the seat next to Ginny. She looked awful, and Harry knew she had her Transfiguration exam the next day. He spent the evening making up the homework he missed, Hermione talking him through everything.

The week passed slowly, as the last real week of school tends to. The students in the sixth year were thankful not to be a year older or

younger. They'd take one more week of school and one less week of exams any day. The fifth and seventh years studied constantly, completely aware of how much these tests would affect their futures.

The D.A. meeting that week was a relief for the busy students. Harry was glad that they had agreed for the week. If that first "battle" had been chaotic, Harry wasn't sure how to describe the mess it was that Friday. But Harry knew this kind of exercise was necessary. They needed to realize that war wasn't orderly. It was a mess. Plain and simple.

Afterwards Harry asked Ginny to stay. He knew she wanted to head to bed and sleep, but he wanted to talk to her. She stayed reluctantly, but had needed some cajoling from Harry. She walked with him along the beach at the bottom of the cliff.

"So what do you want?" she asked him irritated.

"I want to know how the first week went," he asked politely and kindly. She looked burnt out. Maybe he should just let her go.

"As fine as could be expected," she replied. Harry stopped and pulled her into an embrace. "I feel like I have no more brain cells. And yet I know I have another week of this." He pulled out of the hug and looked down at her.

"Next weekend is the last Hogsmeade trip and I was wondering if you wanted to go with me as my date?" Harry asked her. Even after eight months of blissful dating, Harry still felt the butterflies in his gut.

"I'd love to, luv," she replied, turning to him and giving him a hug. "You mind heading back? I've been studying late into the night every night this week and I want to sleep for a long time."

"You mean, cramming, right?" Harry said innocently. She hit him playfully across the chest. "Yeah, we can head back. I just didn't want anyone around if you turned me down."

"Harry, I'll never turn you down," she promised him. He smiled at her, thankful for her support.

“Don’t make a promise you’re not sure you can keep,” he teased her.

“I’m not going to break it, Harry. You’re stuck with me,” she replied.

“It could be worse,” he countered. “I mean, you could be ugly.”

“That’s one backhanded compliment, Harry,” Ginny informed him. They stopped in front of the door.

“It wasn’t meant to be,” Harry said, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her soundly and then led her out into the castle corridor.

Tuesday morning was his exam with Keene. He was beyond nervous. He had been reviewing like mad for this exam. He had no idea what Keene planned to do for the exam itself. A mock duel or a written exam? He wasn’t sure which he preferred.

“Okay, Harry,” Keene told the young man as they sat at the Ravenclaw table. “This is what we’re going to do. For the first part, I’m going to give you a name of a spell; you’re going to perform it. The second part, I’m going to tell you an effect and you’re going to come up with a spell to create it. Then you’re going to tell me why you picked your spell over others, if you thought of others. Be creative.”

Harry nodded, not trusting his voice. He’d never be able to do this. He felt the nerves take over and then he clamped them down. When did he ever let nerves make his decisions for him? Never and he wasn’t starting now.

In the end, Harry did just fine on the exam. He had the distinct impression that Keene was extremely impressed with his performance. Harry smiled as he helped return the Great Hall back into its normal self before the students arrived.

The next afternoon Harry had his exam from Althea. He had long learnt not to have too high of hopes with healing. He just wasn’t cut out to be a healer. He didn’t have the patience. But he felt he passed the exam and did better than he expected.

He woke up Friday morning, dreading the next three hours. It was 4:30 and in thirty minutes he'd be down by the lake getting beaten up by Bryant for his exam. Harry put his clothes on, skipping the robe. He'd be back for it afterwards; it would only be in the way during this exam.

He walked slowly to the Entrance Hall, trying to get his brain to speed up. As he turned into the last corridor before the stairs to the Entrance Hall, someone jumped out behind a statue. Harry instantly jumped as a sword came flying at his head. Looking about himself, Harry realized that his sword was on the doors to the castle.

He ducked the blows from his assailant, whom he guessed was Bryant, but couldn't tell because the man wore a mask. Harry started moving forward, trying to get passed the attacker. Grabbing a club from a nearby suit of armor, Harry started parrying the blows. The club was too heavy to attack with, so Harry just concentrated on driving the man into the Entrance Hall.

Seeing an opening, Harry maneuvered the attacker so that the man was facing towards the door. Harry broke into a dead run, dropping the club as he went. Reaching the doors, he pulled the sword from the sheath and lowered his body into a defensive stance. There was no way that the masked man was Bryant. He moved differently and was way too large to be Bryant.

The actual sword fight was a long one. Harry felt his arms slowly tire from taking blow after blow and giving blow after blow. His overall stamina didn't diminish too much, but his arms started to protest. Just as he thought he'd collapse, he saw an opening in the attacker's guard and he moved forward, swinging the sword up and under. The masked man dropped his sword; Harry had his own at the man's throat.

"Good job, Potter," Bryant said from the Great Hall. "I'm impressed. Shacklebolt was more than willing to help out with this exam. You should thank him." Harry was surprised as the huge man took off his mask. "Let's go for a run."

After running the lake twice, Bryant put him through a dagger-throwing test. He managed to hit every target, which was a very nice surprise. Next came fist fighting, though he let Bryant under his guard and was knocked unconscious. After being revived, Harry sat up, trying to clear his head.

After that came knife fighting, which was a combination of the two previous tests. Shackbolt fought Harry for this one and Harry was very glad to be small and quick. This fight came to a stalemate and Bryant was visibly impressed. After a cool down lap around the lake Harry was free to go.

He limped into the castle and realized that the exam had gone over time. Students were streaming into the Great Hall for breakfast. Harry swore loudly, causing several people to turn and stare at him. And they didn't look away. I must look a mess, Harry thought, amused by the stares. He smiled at them, waving to a few D.A. members and then headed into the Great Hall. He saw two red heads and headed towards them.

"I think I passed that," Harry said, loading his plate with food. He was hungry.

"By not dying? Or with your skills?" Ron asked, clearly alarmed by the way he looked.

"My skills," Harry replied. "What time is it?"

"Eight," Ginny said, still counting the minutes. "And twenty-three minutes."

"What?" Harry yelled, standing up quickly. "I don't have anything for the next exam."

"What do you need?" Hermione asked. "You can borrow a quill and ink from me."

"I don't have my uniform," Harry replied. "I can't go to my Potions exam without a uniform." He stood, ignoring the looks directed at him and sprinted to the Gryffindor Tower.

"Well, it's over," Ron said happily, falling into a chair next to the fire after their Dark Arts exam. "Only one more year and then we're free."

"Talk for yourself," Ginny complained from where she sat on Harry's lap. "Sorry about not being at lunch. I really needed to look over Ancient Runes before that exam this afternoon. Did you make it to your Potions exam on time?"

"Yes I did, barely," Harry responded. "The bell rang seconds after I sat down. Snape almost docked points for that!"

"He would have too," Hermione told Ginny, "had Thia not been talking with him about something. I wonder what it was about?"

"No idea," Ron said, yawning. "But I can't wait until the trip tomorrow. It'll be fun. What are we doing Thursday at the D.A. meeting?" Ron abruptly asked Harry, trying to surprise Harry into answering.

"I'm not telling," Harry said once again. "It's a secret. But Sephra wants to know if we want to play a pick up game on Wednesday. Slytherin versus Gryffindor II."

"Sure," Ron and Ginny said together. Harry smiled at them.

"That's what I told her, but I also said that I was only one of the captains and I'd need to talk to Katie about it." Harry laughed as Ron hit his forehead.

"Did you expect her to say no or something?" Ron asked, trying to figure this out.

"No, but I didn't want to undermine the authority of the head captain," Harry told him. "Remember I'm only the side kick."

"I forgot about that," Ginny said with a smile.

"Why are you so happy?" Harry asked her, leaning his mouth close to her ear to whisper.

"This time next year, you'll be the ones fried and I'll be the one in an exhausted but cheerful mood," she answered him. "Some good has to come of being a year younger."

"I like it that you're younger," Harry told her. "Better than dating an older woman," he added looking over at Ron.

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with dating an older woman," he said defending his girlfriend. "At least both of us are legal."

"It's not my fault about when I was born," Harry countered.

"No, it was all your dad's," Ron replied. Hermione hit Ron and hit him hard.

"That's just wrong, Ron!" she scolded him. "I don't want to hear talk like that!"

Ron laughed, but then stopped as Ginny got out her wand. "I don't want to hear it either, Ronald," she told him angrily. "That's just sick!"

"Yeah, Ron, just sick," Harry echoed his girlfriend. "So what are your guys' plans for tomorrow?"

"We're going to walk the streets and snog in a few places," Hermione answered, surprising all in hearing distance.

"Talking about things that shouldn't be said," Harry said. "I don't want to hear that from your mouth ever again, Hermione. It's bad enough to hear it from Ron."

"We're going to visit the Shrieking Shack and then make our way over to the Three Broomsticks," Ron finally said, still stunned by Hermione. Ginny was laughing now. "I think we missed something," he complained to Harry.

"What about you two?" Hermione asked them.

"Visit George and Fred," Ginny started. "Got to keep a good thing going, particularly since they're free and at work already. Then we're

going to go to a few shops, the Quidditch shop for sure. What time will you be in the Three Broomsticks?"

"How about we meet you there around 2:30," Hermione offered. Harry looked at Ginny and then nodded.

"Sounds fine," Harry answered. "You want to come back and then have dinner in the Room of Requirement?"

"Sure," Hermione offered. "A double date." Both Ron and Harry groaned. "What's wrong with that?"

"We just realized that you're like his sister, 'Mione," Ron answered.

"And Ron's the protective older brother, so I'll have to deal with that," Harry complained. "But I can't think of two lovelier ladies to spend an evening with." Ginny smiled up at him and kissed him quickly on the lips. Hermione was beaming at Harry.

"You make me look bad," Ron informed Harry.

"That's not hard," Harry countered. "I'm going to bed. 'Night Gin, Hermione, Ron."

Laying his head down for the night, Harry couldn't help but look forward to the next week. The Hogsmeade trip would be great, the Quidditch game would be a blast, and what he had planned for the D.A. would be loads of fun.

Author's Notes

Hey, everyone... let's give Pixie three cheers: Hip, hip horray! Hip, hip horray! Hip, hip horray! I got two chapters back from her today... which is why I put up two chapters tonight... let's all cross out fingers and hope that all the chapters I sent back to her come my way soon! You really don't want to see the chapters before she does...

For those of you from other sites, forced onto this one... I'm sorry... but this site is by far the easiest and has the fast turn out rate... so

instead of hoping that schnoogle get's up in time, I'm doing ff.n and I'll know it's up the same day... If you want just leave your reviews on whatever site you hail from and I'll get back to you there...

As for reviewers here: well, I'm still getting used to ff.n and seeing that i'm in panic mode right now (meh, at least i'm down to 8 chapters)please forgive me if I don't reply to you as I normally do... Once I get the last chapter up, I'm planning on doing a huge thank you A/N for you all!

Only four more days! Just a thought that i've been having... what will you do if JKR goes with a relationship you don't like? If you're a H/G shipper and she goes with H/Hr, then what... will you ignore it and continue reading or throw it away in disgust as we do with fanfic? Just a thought...

loci

Chapter Thirty-Nine: The End of the Beginning

When you are with me
I'm free... I'm careless... I believe...
Above all others we will fly.
This brings tears to my eyes.
My sacrifice.
Creed: My Sacrifice

Let me fall if I must fall.
Though the Phoenix may
Or may not rise.
Josh Groban: Let Me Fall

Harry woke for the sixth time that night, screaming. He closed his mouth and climbed out of his bed. He glanced at his roommates' beds, but no one else had awoken. Harry smiled, thankful that he hadn't woken anyone up again. He poured a glass of water and took a look out the window. The rising sun tinted the Forbidden Forest a soft yellow color. Harry sighed longingly; it looked so peaceful.

Suddenly a horse-like creature burst from the sea created by the tree-tops. Harry gritted his teeth; the thestral reminded him why he was awake in the first place. He turned away from the window and looked at the curtains shut around his roommates' beds. Harry hoped fervently that they would never have to suffer from the type of nightmares he did.

He had watched several deaths this night: his parents, Cedric, Sirius, Hestia Jones and her family, Fudge, Draco's innocent victim, Dean's whole family, Cho's aunt, Blaise's parents, Justin's mother and siblings, and the muggle victims from the countless Revelries; just to name a few.

It was the dream about those unknown muggles that had last haunted his sleep. Every Revelry he had ever seen had melted into one long horrifying nightmare. He hadn't realized how many people he had watched die since September. A couple of hundred Muggles had died since then, and hundreds more would until he fought Voldemort.

Harry didn't really think he'd win, but he was the best chance the Wizarding and Muggle worlds had.

Harry felt the tight bundle of nerves tighten even more with that thought. Though the bundle was always there because the Prophecy was never far from his mind, whenever he thought about the details, the bundle only got tighter. He felt close to vomiting at the moment, but he couldn't turn his thoughts away. How could anyone put their faith in him? He was a sixteen, almost seventeen-year-old boy. He didn't stand a chance! Voldemort had more power, knowledge, and experience than he did. It would never be possible.

Harry walked over to the desk he shared with Ron and sat down. His eyes traveled across the clutter until he caught sight of a half hidden box. He moved some papers out of the way and stared at the ring box Remus had given him for his birthday. Opening it up, Harry pulled out his dad's ring and examined it. Hadn't Remus told him to start wearing it? He couldn't remember for sure, but Harry pocketed the ring. He would ask Ginny what she thought about it later.

Looking at the ring reminded Harry about his mum's gift. He looked over at his school trunk, where the wrapped gift was located. Harry almost stood to retrieve it, when Ron let out a loud snore. He shook his head and sat back down. Harry would open it after he got back from the Hogsmeade trip; nothing was going to ruin this day for him and Ginny. He didn't want to be distracted by whatever was in the package.

Glancing back at the desk, Harry noticed a half covered photograph. Removing the papers he had just moved to uncover the ring box, Harry saw a photo taken on Christmas Day this year. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were in the middle with their eldest two sons on either side. Bill had an arm around his girlfriend Melissa. Fred and George were on her other side. Fred had two fingers sticking out of the top of Melissa's head, giving her bunny ears. Melissa was completely oblivious to the fact, but Tonks had caught on to George's trick. At the moment, Tonks was swatting George across the head, with Remus watching her lovingly. Ron was at the end, with one arm curled around Hermione.

The person next to Charlie was Thia. She was standing next to the Grangers. Mrs. Granger was smiling politely, looking completely comfortable. Mr. Granger, though, was shooting glares at Ron, who at the moment was whispering something in Hermione's ear, causing her to giggle.

Harry felt his breath catch as his eyes reached the next girl. Ginny was breathtakingly beautiful. She had her arm wrapped around his waist and she watched the others with a huge smile on her face. She looked so perfect with her family, so at home. Harry watched his photogenic self pull her closer so that he could kiss her ear and tell her something. Harry smiled fondly, remembering that he had done the same thing while waiting for the picture to be taken. He now noticed that the Weasley brothers were watching them kiss, but none were scowling. Harry hoped that the brothers would all forgive him. Ginny looked straight out from the picture, her face glowing with the happiness she felt.

He had to find a way to survive this damn Prophecy! He wanted to take hundreds of pictures just like this one over the coming years, decades even. And he wanted Ginny in every one at his side. He had to survive for Ginny!

...and Ron and Hermione too...

"Good morning, sunshine," Harry told a grumpy Ginny the next morning. She scowled at him, sat next to him, and grabbed a piece of toast. "I don't even get a 'Good morning, git,' from you." Ginny did smile at that, and Harry slipped a hand around her smaller one. They ate the rest of breakfast rather quickly so that they could get an early start on the day.

They walked side by side, holding hands. Harry kept glancing at her. She wore jeans and an old shirt that had belonged to Ron at some point. He only knew that because it was a bright orange Chudley Cannons shirt and was just a little too small for Ginny. He smiled down at his girlfriend, thankful that he'd be able to spend the day with her.

They strolled through Hogsmeade slowly making their way to the twins' shop. They were in no hurry; they had more than enough time until they had to meet Ron and Hermione at The Three Broomsticks. Ginny stopped to gaze in a store window. There were stuffed animals of all sizes in there and Harry remembered his promise to buy her one.

"Let's go in," he suggested to Ginny. She looked up at him, surprised. "I think you deserve a gift for surviving O.W.L.'s without freaking out."

"No, luv, I don't need anything," she argued, not wanting to spend Harry's money.

"Of course you don't need it," Harry responded. "That's why it's called a gift." He led her into the store and up the first aisle. "Pick out one, which ever you want, and I'll buy it." Harry followed her as she looked at each animal. Finally, she stopped and picked one up. It was a stag.

"I want this one," Ginny told Harry, handing it to him. Harry smiled at her and looked at the animal closer. It was filled with beans and was rather floppy. It was large enough to cuddle with if Ginny wanted to. Harry hoped she'd never have to cuddle with the toy. He wanted to be at her side if she needed support. I'll probably be in the hospital wing if she cuddles with him, he thought sarcastically to himself.

Harry went to the front of the store and bought it. Ginny took it out of the bag and hugged it. "Thanks, luv." She grabbed his hand and they continued on their way to the Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Harry was glad she loved it so much.

They turned down a side road and spotted the bright red building. They entered the store and were assaulted by the sound. Loud voices and laughter filled the crowded shop. Ginny and Harry pushed through the crowd, hoping to spot at least one twin. They saw one, talking to a young witch with long blonde hair. As they got closer, Harry remembered whom she was.

"That's the President of their fan club," Harry whispered to Ginny. She laughed and walked over to the two.

“Hey, George, how are you?” Ginny told him, giving her brother a huge hug.

“This isn’t George,” the girl said affronted by Ginny’s behaviour. “This is Fred.”

“I think I can tell my own brothers apart, thank you very much,” Ginny replied. Throughout this whole episode, George (Harry was going to believe Ginny) was turning paler and paler. “Now, George, how do you greet a sister who’s been worried sick for you?”

“I’m going to beat you into a pulp,” George whispered to her, leading the two into the back room. They left a very stunned fan club president behind. “Oy, Fred! Company!” Fred hurried over and the four entered the office.

“Hey, Fred,” Ginny said launching herself at her other brother.

“Hey, Ginny,” Fred replied. “What’s got George so worked up?”

“That thing we call a sister, just told the Prez that I’m me and not you!” George answered angrily.

“That a girl,” Fred said, smiling at his sister fondly.

“How are you both?” Ginny asked. “You look alright.”

“We’re fine,” Fred replied after a moment. It seemed that George didn’t feel like having a conversation with Ginny. “They could have let us out even earlier than they did. They wanted to keep us until tomorrow, but we twisted their arms and they let us out yesterday.”

“How’d business do without you?” Harry asked with a smile.

“It was booming as normal,” George said, willing to talk to Harry. “I guess Lee came up with a promotion with us in it. Haven’t gotten the details out of anyone yet though. Not sure if I want to.”

“And Remus finally took the job we’ve been offering him,” Fred informed them. “He wanted to make sure that our new product line would be released on time, so he took over. He’s a genius! The improvements he made...” he stopped speechless from his awe.

“How are you two?” George asked the couple. Both blushed. “So you got yourself a Monsieur Prongs?” Harry looked at the stuffed animal with surprise. How had he missed that? “I take it that Harry hadn’t realized that it was Prongs.”

Fred burst out laughing. George was now suffering from one of Ginny’s bat-bogey hex. He had bats flying out of his nose, dripping bogies from their own noses. Each bogey-dripping bat was now circling George, dripping more bogies onto him. Harry looked over at his girlfriend; she had her wand pointing at George menacingly. Harry couldn’t hold it in any longer and so he broke down laughing as well.

Ginny smiled innocently at her afflicted brother. “If you apologize, I might just remove the hex.”

“I’m sorry,” he answered dutifully. “But what did I do wrong in the first place?”

“Ginerva Weasley!” Mrs. Weasley’s angry voice came from the door. “Take that hex off your brother instantly!” Ginny obeyed her mother and looked at her sheepishly. “I’m sure he deserved it—”

“Mother!” George replied, slightly insulted. “How dare you just assume that I deserved that! I did nothing wrong, it was all her!”

“I’m sure that’s the truth, George,” Mrs. Weasley said in a tone they all saw through. “Ginny, your brothers were just released from St. Mungo’s. You can’t be hexing them like that.”

“Sorry, mum,” Ginny mumbled. She went over and hugged her mother. “What are you doing here?”

“I just wanted to see Fred and George,” she replied fondly. “And maybe to see a few of you kids.”

"Is dad here?" Fred asked her. She shook her head.

"No, he had to work," she replied tiredly. "He took off so much time when you were first in St. Mungo's that he feels obligated to work every day but Sunday for almost twelve hours a day. He's going to work himself to death." George walked over to his mother and gave her a reassuring hug.

"He'll be fine, mum," he told her. "You'll see, he'll be fine."

"Have you guys seen Tonks and Remus lately?" Ginny asked suddenly.

"Why?" Harry replied. "I saw them last weekend."

"Because I just watched Remus pass the door with Tonks," Ginny replied worriedly. "And they were sneaking away."

"Let them sneak," George told his little sister. "I don't want to follow them. Don't want to see something I'll later regret."

"Remus was looking at a ring," Ginny informed them. "They wouldn't go and elope on us would they?" Harry thought about it for one brief moment and then hurled his way out of the office.

"Remus!" he yelled above the din in the store. He caught sight of Tonks bright pink hair and hurried towards them. "Tonks! Wait up!" The couple stopped and turned around slowly, looks of surprise on both of their faces. As Harry got nearer, he saw the slight look of guilt on Remus's face.

"Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks said brightly. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, it's a Hogsmeade weekend and Gin and I were visiting the twins," Harry answered. "Why didn't you stop in and say hi?"

"We didn't know you were here," Remus said evasively.

"Ginny saw you walking out," Harry told them casually. "She said you had a ring in your hand." Remus and Tonks both gulped visibly.

"You wouldn't elope on us, would you?" Fred asked, coming up behind Harry.

"After all we've done for you?" George asked.

"We're hurt," Fred continued.

"Mortally wounded," George said, stumbling back a few steps, as if he had just been stabbed.

"You stabbed us in the back, and now you expect us to forgive you," Fred said in pretend hysterics.

"I'm insulted. No, we're insulted," George said, striking what was supposed to be a threatening pose.

"I have no idea why," Tonks replied changing her hair to its normal black. "It's not like we did anything to insult you."

"But were you planning on it?" Fred asked. Remus and Tonks exchanged a look and then Remus nodded. "See!" Fred yelled in triumph. "We take you off the street, feed you, clothe you, give you a job, and this is what we get!" George opened his mouth to say something, but Ginny shot him a look.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Ginny asked Tonks in a tone that was meant to make them feel guilty.

"We just wanted to elope and get this over with," Remus answered. "We're sick of waiting and neither of us really wants to plan it."

"So, we decided the easiest way is to just elope and make everyone happy," Tonks finished.

"I'm not sure about the rest, but I really wanted to be at the wedding," Harry told them. "And going behind our backs like that, it kinda hurts."

"Does Thia know about this?" Mrs. Weasley asked. Remus shook his head. "There's the number one reason why you shouldn't. My

youngest sister eloped, never told my parents who she married, had the guy's kids, and then died. The Death Eaters left a note saying that it was her husband's fault that she and her kids were dead. Tore the family apart."

"Anyways," Harry said, changing the topic of conversation. "Have you guys talked to Shacklebolt lately?"

"Yeah," Tonks said, grateful for the change of topic. "He was really impressed that you beat him at the sword. And stalemated him with the daggers. Nice job." Harry blushed.

"That's not what I meant," he stammered. "I just want to know what Bryant thinks. And why was Shacklebolt so willing to help?"

"I'm not sure what Bryant thinks, you'll have to talk to Thia about that," Remus answered. "But Shacklebolt enjoys non-magical weaponry, and Bryant's been talking you up at meetings and what not. Hope you don't mind."

"He's been talking me up?" Harry repeated, not believing what he had heard. "Bryant complimenting me?"

"Why's that so hard to believe?" Mrs. Weasley asked worriedly.

"Bryant doesn't give compliments," Harry explained, still stunned. "And he's told me a number of times that I'm the worst student he's ever had."

"His bark is worse than his bite," Thia said, stepping from around the next aisle. "Were you really going to elope on me?" she asked her brother. Remus nodded. "I'm disappointed in you! I mean, we all know what kind of problems that caused Sam. And, you made Sirius and me promise not to elope and in return you promised not to. Of course, none of us really expected you to find a girl willing to put up with your mood swings on top of your form changes."

Remus broke out laughing. "I forgot about that. All right, you got me there, sister mine." He turned to Tonks and gave her a quick kiss. "Sorry, my dear, looks like we'll have to wait a bit longer." Harry

sighed on the inside. They had gotten so much ready for their wedding later this summer.

“Luv,” Ginny said, grabbing Harry’s hand. “We need to be going. Especially if we’re to meet Ron and Hermione later.” Harry nodded and they said goodbye.

“Let’s get a quick lunch,” Harry suggested. Ginny nodded and they headed to the Hog’s Head. Aberforth, Dumbledore’s brother, was the bartender. He nodded to the couple and waited for them to sit down. They ordered some fish and chips to share and waited for their food.

“That was close,” Ginny told him softly. “I thought they had made it out of the store.”

“I figured they’d still go out and elope, until Thia showed up,” Harry replied. “I wonder who Sam is?”

“My aunt’s name was Samantha, but I guess everyone called her Sam,” Ginny answered. “That’s the aunt who eloped, like my mum said, and she died before I was born.”

“I wonder if they’re the same person?” Harry mused out loud. At that moment, Aberforth brought their meal and left. They ate in silence for a bit, each with their own thoughts. Harry’s mind led him down a path he hadn’t followed in a long while.

‘Tell him that Sam sends her love.’ The ‘him’ was Snape and Harry’s mother had told him to pass that message along when he had almost died at Christmas. They couldn’t be the same Sam could they? The Sam who was best friends with his mum, Ginny’s aunt, and the Sam that wanted Snape to know that she loved him.

“What are you thinking about, luv?” Ginny asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“Nothing much,” he lied. “What about you, Gin?”

“How cute you look,” she answered causing him to blush. “You’re even cuter when you blush.”

"Thanks," he replied dryly, causing Ginny to laugh. Harry realized that the food was gone. "Ready?" She nodded and Harry went to pay the bill. They left and walked toward the Quidditch supply store. "What did you need here?" he asked her for the hundredth time.

"I'm hoping they have a chaser book Katie was telling me about," Ginny told him. "And to look around."

"Not going to argue with that." They entered the store and the two browsed the shelves with interest. They walked down the book section and Harry helped Ginny find the book she wanted.

"How to Chase When You Don't Want To, why do you need this, Gin?" Harry asked, reading the summary on the inside front cover.

"It's really a good book," Ginny answered. "I've borrowed Katie's copy several times through out the year. But she's not going to be here next year, so I needed my own copy." They wandered through the rest of the store stopping to admire the new Nimbus 2005. It wasn't better than Harry's Firebolt, but it was better than Ginny's current broom. "I'd love that broom."

Harry smiled at her and then they walked down the last aisle. At the very end was a display of snitches. "Don't you want your own snitch?" Ginny asked him. Harry nodded, watching the snitches glitter in the light. "I'll get you one. Mum, gave me some money for the book and I have extra. Pick one out," she told him and waited for him to hand her one of the boxed snitches. Ginny walked to the checkout and bought both items.

They walked outside and decided just to walk around Hogsmeade for the next two hours. They walked to the end of Main Street and Harry found himself looking at the fence where he, Ron, and Hermione had met "Snuffles" the black mutt more commonly known as Sirius. He hopped the fence and led Ginny up the slope. After some time, they entered the cave where Sirius and Buckbeak had lived during his fourth year.

"Where are we?" Ginny asked looking around the cave. Harry's eyes fell on the small bones littering the sides of the cave. Sirius ate rats for me! Harry told her where they were. Then he sat on one of the larger rocks, wrapping his arms around his legs and resting his head on his knees. Ginny set her stuff down and walked over to him. She kneeled in front of him, trying to see his eyes. "Are you alright, luv?" she asked knowing the answer was no.

"I miss them," was all Harry could say. Ginny pulled his arms from around his legs and then sat on his lap. She threw her arms around him and held him close to her.

Harry leaned his head on top of hers and let the few tears fall. Harry was glad she was his girlfriend. No one else would have known what he needed exactly. Hermione would have tried to argue the tears away with logic. Ron would have gotten embarrassed and left. But Ginny knew he just needed to be held, no words were necessary.

Soon the tears were gone, and Harry hugged Ginny tighter and kissed her. They were busy with that for a long while, until Harry thought about their meeting with Ron and Hermione. "Sorry, Gin," he croaked. "But we need to go to the Three Broomsticks."

"Bugger," Ginny mumbled, putting her hair back up. Harry grabbed her bag, Ginny her stag, and they walked side by side, down the mountainside. It was almost three o'clock by the time they reached the Three Broomsticks.

"What took you guys so long?" Ron asked right away.

"You don't want to know, Ron," Ginny replied to her brother icily. "Trust me, you don't want to know." Ron pretended to dry heave and Harry laughed. Ron and Harry left to get the food and drinks. A little later, they came back and set everything down at the table.

"We saw Tonks and Remus earlier," Harry told the two.

"Yeah, we know," Hermione interrupted. "We stopped by the shop before coming here. Thia was still giving Remus a hard time about almost eloping."

"I'm glad they didn't," Ginny said thankfully. "We've been planning the wedding for months now! They couldn't just elope on us!"

"We have the dress," Hermione said listing several things off, "the location, the date, the invitations are made, and now Remus has the ring, so nothing major should need to be done until the twenty-eighth." Harry nodded in agreement.

"Have we figured out how to get them there?" Harry asked the group. Everyone shook their heads.

"Bill and Shacklebolt were going to figure out how to do it," Ron finally said.

"Let's make a promise," Harry said after taking a gulp of butterbeer. Everyone nodded. "No matter what happens, those two get married. They've been waiting a long time now, and it's not fair to them if it's delayed because something happened to someone else."

"Promise," Ginny said, squeezing his left hand in her right.

"Sounds like a plan to me, mate," Ron agreed. Hermione was biting her bottom lip, but then her face broke into a smile.

"Of course we'll make sure that they get married," she replied. Everyone smiled and then continued eating in silence. Harry finished first and took out the snitch. He was playing with it, just as his father had all those years ago, as Ginny started talking.

"So what did you guys do?" she asked Hermione.

"We went up to the Shrieking Shack," Hermione started before Ron interrupted her.

"We scared the crap out of some third year Gryffindors," Ron said with a smile. "We saw them heading up to the house, so we took the other way and sneaked into the building without them knowing. When they were right next to a boarded up window we both screamed

bloody murder.” Ron stopped trying not to laugh at Ginny, who had just snorted butterbeer out of her nose.

“They ran like they were chased by Voldemort himself,” Ron finished, still laughing. Ginny had her face cleaned and was working on drying off her shirt. “Hey, when did I give you that shirt?” Ron asked angrily.

“Last summer when I asked for it,” Ginny replied.

“Did you have to get butterbeer all over it?” he asked, almost whining.

“Yes, I did, Ron,” Ginny answered patiently. “That’s all I ever do, try to destroy your Cannons stuff.”

“My stuff...” Ron muttered softly. “It’s all gone this time.” Fred and George had stepped up last September and saved all of Ron’s Cannon’s stuff from destruction. But no one knew that the Death Eaters were attacking at the end of March. “It’s all gone.”

“It’s alright, Ron,” Hermione said, giving the boy a hug. Harry patted his shoulder in understanding, but Ginny just laughed.

“I think we got lucky, just losing our stuff,” Ginny said. “We still have our brothers, our friends, our parents, who cares if we lost some stuff.”

“I’ve spent years of allowance buying all that stuff,” Ron said, smiling reminiscently. “And years of birthday gifts and Christmas gifts. I guess it’s just the shock of never seeing it again.”

“I’m sure you’ll get more, Ron,” Harry told his best friend, reaching across the table as the snitch almost got away. “We all know how much you love them, and it’s the easiest gift to buy you. No one really needs to think about it.” Ron smiled.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he finally said. “What are you doing at the D.A. meeting this week?”

"I'm going to hang you by your toes and have people shoot hexes at you," Harry answered with a laugh as Ron's face fell. "I'm joking, Ron."

"I knew that!" he said overly loud.

"Sure you did," Ginny said sarcastically. "So what are we doing?" She smiled up at him and Harry felt his resolve melt away.

"I was planning to have a party," Harry answered. "And now that you know, you can help plan it. Just remember, Thia's going to be there, and she hates drunk teens."

"So, no firewhiskey," Ron said with a smile. Hermione hit him across the head. "I was just kidding. We could do some bungee jumping off the cliff," he finally said.

"Where did you learn about bungee jumping?" Harry asked curiously.

"I saw some muggles jumping from a bridge with rope tied to their ankles," Ron said with a shrug. "Asked Hermione about it one time, and I've always wanted to try it. I'm sure there'd be lot's of people who'd want to give it a try."

"There's going to be some dancing, right?" Ginny asked Harry tentatively.

"Of course," Harry responded quickly. "Wouldn't want to miss a chance to dance with the prettiest girl in the world, would I?"

"Stop trying to steal my girl, Potter," Ron threatened. "You don't have to hit on her with me around." Harry smiled.

"I wasn't hitting on your girl, Weasley," Harry responded. "I was hitting on your sister who happens to be my girl."

"We are no one's girl," Hermione told the boys angrily.

“Speak for yourself, Hermione,” Ginny said laughing. “I can be Harry’s girl any day.” Harry hugged her. At that moment, he felt something cold naw at his insides. “Just as long as I can say he’s my guy.”

“Of course,” Harry said, without realizing that he was talking. Softly the screams from his nightmares had started to fill his mind. He kissed Ginny’s cheek softly. “I’ll be right back. I need to find the loo.” Ginny nodded and Harry left, pocketing the snitch. He walked past the bathroom and out the back entrance. He hurried around the pub and looked around Hogsmeade frantically.

The dementors had to be coming. That’s the only reason Harry could think of for the coldness and the screams. Only dementors. And he had so many horrors in his short life that he could sense them coming miles away. No one around him was affected yet, but Harry knew they were coming. He should go back into the pub and tell Ginny to go to Hogwarts and get help. He just wanted her to get help. He wasn’t trying to protect her.

The air went pitch black and icy cold. Harry lit his wand tip and saw the first dementor. And then he saw the first Patronus. It was a swan and it flew right into the creature from Cho’s wand. A second Patronus joined the fray; it belonged to Blaise and was a huge serpent. Harry tried to think of a happy memory. He just needed one.

More dementors swarmed into Hogsmeade. Harry felt his knees collapse as more painful memories shot through his mind. Cedric falling, Sirius falling, limbs falling, sparks falling, Fudge falling. All falling. Then the screams came and hit him hard. His mother’s last words. Sephra’s parents’ sobs and screams. The screams of countless Muggles, terrified beyond reason. Hestia’s children’s last cries. Sirius’s final laugh. The merciless laughter of Death Eaters as they tortured and killed.

He felt his face hit stone. He was laying face first in the street. He needed to think of a happy memory.

Just one. That’s all it takes, he thought to himself.

He mentally pushed away the memories that threatened to sweep him away.

Just one happy memory.

He felt rather than saw a dementor approach him.

Just one memory.

Half rotten hands reached around his body, turning him over.

Only one!

The hands tilted his head back, giving the creature better access to his soul.

Come on, Potter, just one memory.

Harry closed his mouth, biting the inside of his lips so that the creature couldn't kiss him.

What's the matter with you, Potter? You only need one!

The fingers pried open Harry's mouth. Harry closed his eyes.

All you need is one damn memory!

Harry felt the putrid breath of the creature on his face.

Need to think of one memory....

Harry opened his eyes.

For Ginny.... Ginny! Memories flooded Harry's mind. Ginny giving him his birthday gift last year. Waking Ginny up and giving her her birthday gift. The train ride to school. Quidditch tryouts. Their first kiss. Their first date. All their dates. Flying with her. Shopping with her. Waking up in the hospital wing with her at his bedside. Christmas break at the Burrow. Losing control. The Journal. Her help through those months without Ron. Helping her through the twins' stay in St.

Mungo's. Playing Quidditch with her. Studying for her O.W.L.'s. Making out with her up on the mountain. Finding her in the Chamber of Secrets, all but dead. The younger Ginny, with the elbow in the butter.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry bellowed. Prongs shot from his wand and straight through the dementor, which was centimeters from closing onto his mouth. Harry stood on shaky knees processing what he saw quickly. Ron and Hermione were protecting a group of third years. Ginny was helping Cho protect some fourth years. Blaise, Sephra, and Edlyn were fighting to protect a cluster of innocent shoppers. Harry saw Thia fighting a dementor next to several terrified third years. A young boy, no more than eight, lay near Harry, his soulless eyes staring out at the world accusingly.

Then he saw Snape, fighting to produce a Patronus. Snape had seen as many horrors as he, Harry, had, if not more. Harry sent Prongs after the dementor attacking Snape. There were so many dementors; they didn't stand a chance unless help arrived. Prongs rescued Snape and then went after the nearest dementor. Snape gave Harry a quick nod and then finally produced a Patronus. A large silvery butterfly shot from Snape's wand and attacked a nearby dementor.

Suddenly, the dementors fled the village, allowing the sun to rise. What Harry saw made him wish that it were dark again. Across from Harry was Voldemort. He held Ginny by her hair in his left hand. Next to him was Bellatrix, and she had a firm grip on Hermione's hair. On Voldemort's other side was Wormtail, and he held both girls' wands in one of his hands, the silver one.

Harry felt rather than heard movement behind him. "We're right behind you, Harry," Thia told him reassuringly.

"Who's we?" Harry asked never taking his eyes from Ginny.

"Remus, Tonks, Mad-Eye, Severus, Minerva, Dedalus, Molly, Arthur, Bill, Fred, George, Charlie, Melissa," Thia listed for him, until he interrupted her.

“Just say ‘your guard’ and I’ll understand,” Harry barked at her. He had just noticed Ron at Voldemort’s feet. Ron wasn’t moving and from the distance, Harry couldn’t tell if he was breathing or not. “What do you want, Tom?” Harry yelled at his archenemy.

Voldemort laughed. “Do you think you are in the same position as last time, my dear Potter?” Voldemort asked mockingly. He shook Ginny by the hair and Harry could hear her groan of pain even at that distance.

“No, I don’t think we are,” Harry acknowledged. “That’s why I asked what you wanted instead of shooting my mouth off!”

“What I want is quite simple,” Voldemort said, raising Ginny a few feet off the ground. “I want you to die slowly, painfully, and soon. But before that, I want you to watch those you love die slow, painful deaths.” Harry felt his rage start to boil. He couldn’t watch Voldemort kill Ginny, Hermione, and Ron right in front of him.

“Don’t you dare,” Harry said in a cold measured voice, controlling the rage.

“What shouldn’t I dare?” Voldemort asked running his wand along Ginny’s throat. “Should I, let’s say, take off a hand or an arm even?”

“No,” Harry said quickly. It was too quick and the Death Eaters all laughed. “Don’t do that,” Harry commanded, not begging the man.

“And why shouldn’t I, boy?” Voldemort asked, levitating Ginny’s right hand closer to his face. Harry felt his concern for her start to overwhelm his other thoughts. Harry could tell by the look in Voldemort’s eyes that he was deadly serious. Voldemort would kill Ginny, then Hermione, and then Ron. It would be a slow death, a painful death. And he was the cause. He was the reason.

His friends were his lease on life. When things got hard and the going got tough, Harry turned to these three friends. A person couldn’t ask for better ones. Harry wouldn’t ask for better, because there weren’t any better. They had helped him through the last six years, each in

their own way. Hermione kept him out of the majority of the trouble he should have been in. Whether it was with her quick thinking and lying, or keeping him from doing something stupid to begin with, Harry had definitely served fewer detentions because of her. Ron was always right where he was needed, next to Harry's side. Harry knew it rubbed Ron wrong at times, always being the sidekick, but it was Harry with the Prophecy, and he needed the sidekick to him get through it all. And then there was Ginny. What could he say? She was his life.

The group of wizards and witches that surrounded Harry, good and bad alike, took a step or two back. He was radiating pure power. Tonks recognized it from right after Christmas. The only three people who didn't move were Voldemort, Ginny, who didn't have a choice, and the unconscious Ron.

"Let them go, Tom," Harry commanded.

"And why should I, Potter?" Voldemort asked mockingly. "There is nothing you can do."

"You don't need them," Harry told him in a cold voice. All Harry wanted was one clear opening and then BAM! Voldemort wouldn't know what hit him.

"True, and that's why I'm going to kill this brat!" Voldemort raised his wand and his lips began to form the words of the most unforgivable of curses.

"Wait!" Harry yelled. The light faded away from around Harry and Voldemort laughed at his panic. "How about a trade? Something you want for something I want?"

"Name your terms, Potter," Voldemort replied, curious despite himself.

"You want me, I want Ginny, Ron, and Hermione to survive this without any more scratches," Harry informed him and the crowd. Harry felt his guard stir to life.

"They won't let it happen," Voldemort pointed to the adults behind Harry.

"They'll do whatever I tell them," Harry said confidently. "You give them to my guard, and I'll go with you to wherever you want for as long as you can keep me there."

"How do I know you aren't lying?" Voldemort asked. "That you won't disappear the moment I release this filth you call friends."

"Because I give you my word as a Gryffindor," Harry promised. "I'll follow my end of the bargain as long as you follow yours."

"Harry, don't you dare!" Thia commanded the boy. Harry turned around, knowing that his guard would protect him.

"I have to, Thia, so don't argue with me," Harry told her calmly. "One life for three. I think I'm getting the better end of that bargain."

"Potter, you're going to hurt my little sister," Bill warned him. Harry felt a huge stone fall into the pit of his stomach.

"But at least she's alive to feel that pain," Harry answered. A few others opened their mouths to try to dissuade him, but Snape cut them all off.

"You do know what you're getting into," he mused out loud. "As long as you don't get yourself killed, go, before He changes His mind." Harry nodded and turned around.

"Agreed?" Harry asked. "You'll give them to my guard without any more scratches and I'll go with you."

"Agreed," Voldemort replied. He carelessly levitated Ginny and Ron toward the guard and Bellatrix did the same with Hermione.

"Are they hurt from that?" Harry asked almost hopefully. Thia shook her head in a disappointed no. "Well, see you guys later."

“Harry, don’t you dare,” Ginny croaked out. Harry turned to look at her and felt his heart break.

“Just keep Prongs close, luv,” Harry replied. “I’ll be home soon enough.” Harry took one last look at his friends and those he called family, before turning his back to them and walking toward Voldemort.

A few feet from Voldemort, the wizard shouted, “Crucio!” Harry felt his nerves burn and knew that he had condemned himself for a boat load of suffering in the coming days, weeks, and maybe even months. But that knowledge only lasted for a brief second, until the pain swept all lucid thought from his mind.

The pain stopped, Voldemort grabbed Harry’s arm, and soon Harry felt the familiar pull behind the navel take him away.

Chapter Forty: Rock Bottom

I kept up With the prophecy you spoke.
I kept up With the message inside.
Lost sight of the irony
Of twisted faith.
Creed

“Noooooooooooooooooooo!” Ginny screamed with all her might. Harry couldn’t be gone. He hadn’t just left her. He would reappear and say that it was a just huge joke. The ultimate practical joke. Any moment. Any second now.

But he never came. Now, a day later, she lay in a bed in the hospital wing completely dejected and depressed. Harry had never reappeared. Just moments after Harry had disappeared, Aurors apparated all around them. They found the two groups completely stunned. The Death Eaters weren’t sure what Voldemort wanted and they didn’t know who was in charge.

Ginny and those surrounding her had stared at the last spot where Harry had been. He was gone. He walked over and left with Voldemort. Granted, he didn’t go without bargaining for their lives. Granted, Voldemort had tortured Harry right in front of them. But he had walked over and left with Voldemort. With Voldemort! When she got her hands on Harry, she was going to strangle the boy!

No you’re not, a voice inside her head said. You’re going to wrap your arms around his waist and never let go!

So what if she did? Ginny knew Harry would need loving care when he got back from wherever he’d gone with Voldemort. Why did he go with Voldemort? What was the point? Just to save their lives? They weren’t so important that they were worth Harry’s life.

Great! Now she was doubting the one thing about Harry that she loved more than anything, his selflessness. Of course, to him their lives were worth his. He’d have traded places with some stranger, if it meant that that stranger would be spared some amount of pain.

She started to play with the ring he had given her at Christmas. He told her that he couldn't give her any promises. But why could he not? Did he really believe that he might not survive? But if he didn't believe that he would survive, why did he leave with Voldemort?

Hogsmeade was a mess. The battle that occurred moments after the Aurors' arrival tore the village apart. Harry's guard had portkey-ed as many students out as they could. A bunch of Aurors helped with that. Ginny had left without Prongs, as she had named her stuffed animal. Just a few hours ago, George had shown up with it.

George wouldn't tell her something though. Something important. Harry couldn't be dead already! He just couldn't! No, it wasn't Harry. It was something else. Something more important than Harry. Or maybe it was just more real.

There were times that Ginny would wake up and she knew Harry would be right next to her bed. But he never was. He never came. She'd find out what happened if it took her all to do it.

"Welcome to my humble abode," Voldemort spat at Harry's prone form. Harry moaned in response. He had never felt so bad in his life. Well, physically, he had felt worse, but he had just abandoned Ginny. His guilt was overwhelming him. "Do you miss your sweet red-headed whore already?"

"Don't you dare say that about Ginny!" Harry yelled at Voldemort. Harry's anger gave him strength. He stood and swayed slightly. Voldemort only laughed.

"She's not your whore then?" Voldemort scoffed. "Then what exactly did you bargain your life for? No, never mind I already know. You love playing the hero. You are a fool, Potter. A common Gryffindor fool. Crucio!"

Harry fell back to the ground, twitching. His nerves screamed in agony. He just wanted the pain to stop. His heart was already broken, why did Voldemort need to break his body? Let the pain stop! Please, let the pain stop!

Voldemort lifted the curse and Harry felt his body relax as the pain subsided. "Now, Potter, we're going to have a good time while you're here visiting. I should show you to your rooms." Voldemort lifted Harry with a spell and threw him against a wall. With another flick of Voldemort's wrist, Harry flew down a hallway. Another flick, and Harry rounded the corner. And so it went until Harry was tossed into a cell. He slumped to the floor and laid his head against the cool stone floor.

"I hope you find these accommodations acceptable, Potter," Voldemort mocked Harry. "If not, I'll try and find worse." Voldemort shut the heavy metal door and walked back up the stairs, laughing. Harry closed his eyes, praying that he'd wake up and find out that the day had only been a dream.

Screams surrounded the Aurors. Tonks rushed among them, looking for Remus. She'd find him. She had to. She searched frantically, looking at each face for only a split second. There he was, fighting with Wormtail, the bloody traitor. Remus was forcing Wormtail's silver hand away from his body.

Silver! It was poison to Remus! Tonks hurried closer, took aim, and sent a stunner right at Wormtail. The rat fell to the ground, unconscious. Tonks rushed to Remus' side and gave him a quick look over.

"Did he touch you?" she asked him worriedly. Remus nodded. Tonks took out a portkey and gave it to Remus. "See you in a bit, my love." Remus smiled and disappeared. Tonks glanced around. Where was she needed the most? She saw Shacklebolt fighting off two Death Eaters, but they had him backed into a corner. At any moment one of them would kill him.

Tonks ran toward him, stunning a completely different Death Eater as she went. When she was in range, she blinded one Death Eater and then stunned him. Shacklebolt quickly finished off the other Death Eater and then smiled at her gratefully. The two parted ways and helped with other fights in the battle.

Thia fought through the dust from the collapsed building that used to be the Three Broomsticks. She coughed. Where was everyone? She heard some yelling from the rubble and knew people were trapped within the building. Should she help? The battle had moved away

from the area. Should she go fight in the battle or help those stranded? When she heard the voice of one of her students call from the rubble, she made up her mind.

The voice belonged to Cassandra, a fourth year Gryffindor. Thia searched the rubble carefully, listening to where her cries come from. Soon, Thia located the girl and started to move the rubble away from her carefully. After a few tense moments, Thia had the girl out of the remains of the pub. Thia quickly made a portkey and got Cassandra out of the village.

Thia searched the debris carefully, sending any living victims to the infirmary at Hogwarts. She finished searching the pub and then moved on to the next house. She had been positive that she had heard a baby's cry come from there.

There had to be something seriously wrong. Neither her mother nor her father had visited her in the hospital wing. That was so strange for those two. Sure, her father didn't come often when she was hurt, but he'd come at least once. And with Harry...

Ginny brushed fiercely at the tears that were threatening to run down her cheeks. She would not cry yet again for Harry. She was all cried out at the moment and it only made the stay in this horrible hall even worse. But Ginny did hug Prongs to her, thanking Harry (wherever he was) for buying her for her.

Something had to be wrong. That was the only thing Ginny could think of to make her parents' disappearance make sense. They wouldn't just ignore her without a viable reason. And it would be bad, to keep them away for so long.

Someone groaned as whoever it was shifted positions. The hospital wing was packed. Madam Pomfrey had told Ginny that she could leave tomorrow after one last check up. All that was wrong now was her emotions. But other than that she was fine. Her scalp had healed already and her broken bones were taken care of.

All that remained was her depression and feelings of loss. She needed her mum. No, what she really needed was her daddy.

Bill fought like a mad man. He wasn't a redhead for nothing. And they had threatened his littlest brother, nearly pulled out his baby sister's hair, made the best thing in her life leave, and then nearly killed his girlfriend. Well, they had better get out of his way. The Egyptians had same nasty curses, and he knew most of them. Where did Melissa get to now?

He saw her ten or so feet away. She was fighting a Death Eater and keeping her own. He sent a curse at the Death Eater that was threatening one of his little brothers. Fred, it looked like from where he stood. Bill scanned the battle. Where was George? Those two always stuck together in a fight. Bill rushed over to ask, but a curse made him drop to the ground.

He located the spell's caster and sent a disfiguring spell at the Death Eater. Bill didn't watch as the spell went to work. Yes, those Egyptians knew their curses well. He got back up and finished the sprint to Fred. "Where's George?" he panted out.

"He went to go get a gift Harry gave Ginny," Fred answered. "Ginny'll be devastated if she loses it. Not that she won't be devastated without Harry, but, you know," he finished off lamely. And Bill did know. They parted company, Bill to help Charlie and Fred to go make sure George was alright.

If anything happened to any of his little brothers, he, Bill Weasley, would curse the Death Eaters responsible in such a way that even the Egyptians would be impressed.

"Molly, duck!" Arthur yelled at his wife. She ducked and sent a Severing charm at the offending Death Eater. Arthur heard the Death Eater grunt in pain.

"Where are the boys?" Molly yelled at him. He pointed out Charlie, who was being aided by Bill at the moment. Fred and George just appeared around a corner, George with a stuffed animal's head sticking out of his shirt.

"Ginny and Ron are at Hogwarts and Percy never showed up to begin with," he shouted over to her. Molly nodded and returned her

undivided attention to a Death Eater who was threatening Melissa. How he loved this woman! She was worth her temper completely. The couple turned their attention back to the fight at hand. Molly sent a stunner at the Death Eaters who were threatening Melissa. Arthur sent a Silencing charm at another nearby Death Eater. He had learnt last year that a Silencing charm could save lives: Hermione was living proof to that.

“Arg!” Fred yelled, grabbing one of his legs. Every Weasley turned, hearing one of their own in pain. George stunned the Death Eater that caused it, and Althea Cayrs hurried over to Fred and healed his leg. Arthur turned around and found a wand pointing right between his eyes.

Something bad had happened. Ginny knew that for sure when both Fred and George walked into the hospital wing that second morning, a Monday. Something had happened and they wouldn’t tell her! She was about ready to burst!

“What’s the matter?” she asked once again. The twins took one look at her and fled the infirmary. What had happened that the twins would run from her? What had happened that had kept her parents from seeing her?

It couldn’t be Harry. They’d tell her if it was Harry, wouldn’t they?

“My master wishes to see you, Potter,” the oily voice of a Death Eater said. Harry shook his head, trying to remember where he was and why he was here. It all came flooding back and Harry nearly fell over with the guilt that assaulted him. He had left Ginny. What had he been thinking? “My master wants to see you now, Potter!” Harry nodded and followed the Death Eater back up the stairs and through the maze of hallways until they reached ornately carved doors. The doors opened on their own accord and Harry entered the room with some prodding from the Death Eater.

“Ah, good to see you, Potter,” Voldemort told the boy. “I was wondering how you found your rooms?” Voldemort seemed to be in a jolly mood and Harry found Dark Wizards to be extremely scary when they’re jolly.

"They were acceptable," Harry told the monster defiantly. Voldemort laughed at the boy's spunk. "The company could be better though." Every Death Eater in the room took a menacing step forward, but Voldemort waved them off.

"No, I suppose you'd rather have the company of your whore of a girl," Voldemort said with a cruel smile. Harry felt his temper rise, but he kept it in check this time. He wouldn't bring Voldemort amusement. "Not defending her honor today, Potter? Maybe it is the truth then. We shall find out soon enough. Crucio!"

Harry fell to his knees, the pain overwhelming all other thoughts. He tried not to scream, but it was soon impossible. The pain became too much and Harry felt his face hit the ground. Still the pain did not go away. Let it stop. Please, let it stop. But the pain didn't. It went on and on. Harry felt every nerve in his body come close to bursting. Just when he thought death was blissfully near, the pain resided.

"That, Potter, is true pain," Voldemort told the boy. "Though I'm told Gryffindors feel a different type of pain. Should I tell you my good news? No, I think I'll make you wait. It will be good for your patience if you wait."

"How long have I been here?" Harry asked, his voice breaking several times. Voldemort laughed.

"Been here too long already?" Voldemort asked viciously. "It is only Sunday. You've been here exactly one day, Potter. Are you so sure you got the better end of the bargain?"

"Yes," was Harry's simple answer.

"Bella," Voldemort commanded. Bellatrix crawled forward and looked up at her lord. "I want you to take the boy to his cell and show him a good time." Bellatrix smiled evilly at Harry and took Harry back to his cell in the same manner as Voldemort had the day before.

Only one day!

Althea said the healing charm quickly and helped Fred to his feet. George pointed at something in horror and both she and Fred turned

to look where he pointed. Arthur Weasley was standing with a Death Eater's wand between the eyes.

"No!" the Weasley sons yelled together. Molly watched in silence.

"Avada Kedavra!" the oily voice of Lucius Malfoy sneered. Arthur Weasley fell, dead before he hit the ground. Dead before anyone could blink. Dead.

Fred turned to her, pleading with his eyes. "Fix him," George begged. She shook her head no.

"I can't," she said heavily, with the guilt that only a healer can feel. "I can't bring the dead back."

She was released later that same day. Still Monday. Harry had been gone for two days, but it seemed like an eternity. None of her brothers would look her in the face. Not once had she seen her parents since she had arrived at Hogwarts by portkey. Her mother should have been at her side immediately.

Something had happened. She knew that the moment she stepped into the Gryffindor Common Room. But it could have been any one of a number of things. The dementors had kissed two Gryffindors. Voldemort had kidnapped Harry. Several people had lost friends and family in the ensuing battle.

Yet somehow, she didn't know how, she knew it was none of these reasons that caused the silence that had descended on the common room as she entered. She quickly saw Ron's tearful face, Hermione's sob wracked body, the silent twins, and the hundreds of eyes upon her.

Something was wrong, and by God, she'd find out if it'd kill her. And in a way it would.

Bill and Charlie entered the common room just a few moments after Ginny. She still hadn't moved from where she was standing. They gathered her into a huge hug. Then they swept her out of the common room and down the hall. They entered an unused classroom

and waited. After several long minutes, Fred, George, Ron, and Hermione joined them.

“Ginny, we need to talk to you,” Bill said quietly.

“The hell you do!” Ginny yelled at them angrily. “What do you all know that I don’t?” Bill recoiled from her as if she had struck him. How was he supposed to tell her? “Don’t you bloody well run from me, William Arthur Weasley!” Bill flinched again at the use of their father’s name, even if it was unintentional.

It was a testimony to the respect the Weasley boys had learnt to show Ginny that she didn’t know what they all already knew. They were terrified of her. And with good reason, she had one hell of a bat-bogey hex. Only two women commanded the same amount of respect as each of the brothers showed Ginny: their mother and Professor McGonagall. And now they had to face the one with the most violent temper and tell her the secret.

“Ginny,” Bill said trying to placate her. “Sit down, please.” Ginny stared at him and then followed his directions. “Ginny, we’re sorry we didn’t tell you right away, but we all wanted to be with you when we told you what we are going to tell you.”

“I was just released from St. Mungo’s,” Charlie explained to her. “And we were hoping mum would be able to come, but she’s not talking to anyone at the moment.” There was a palpable silence that descended in the room.

“What?” Ginny tried to ask in a small voice. She waited a bit and then tried again. “What about daddy?” she asked in the same small voice. Her voice reminded Bill of a time when he had told the four year old Ginny that the gnomes from the garden had torn apart her favorite stuffed teddy bear.

“Dad was...” Ron tried to say. They had drawn straws and Ron had gotten the short one. He would have to say it. Even though they all knew Ginny knew now. “Lucius Malfoy killed Dad,” Ron finished. “Mum hit Lucius with a stunner and he’s in Azkaban again.”

“Dad’s... gone?” she asked. It couldn’t be. It was a bad dream. She’d wake up and today would be Saturday and she’d spend it with Harry again. Or she’d wake up in his lap up on the mountainside, kissing him senseless. Either way, the past few days would only be a nightmare.

“Yes,” Bill said, pulling his sister into a hug. She burst into tears, clutching Prongs to her body along with her eldest brother.

It almost killed each and every Weasley; even the one hundreds of miles away.

Harry woke up sore. He couldn’t figure out why he was so sore. He hadn’t done anything in the last week or two that should warrant this stiffness. Slowly, he realized his predicament, understanding flooding his mind. He was a captive and Voldemort was making sure he enjoyed his stay.

Harry sat up carefully. Every muscle in his body screamed in agony as he stretched them. His stomach growled loudly and he looked around for something to eat. There was a moldy piece of bread and some water next to the door. Slowly and cautiously, Harry crawled to the plate and ate the food, despite the mold.

Harry figured that it was only Monday. Even with Bellatrix’s torture, Harry’s stomach told him that it hadn’t been filled in a few days. It was Monday, or maybe Tuesday. It didn’t really matter. One way or the other, Harry was still stuck wherever he was. What had he gotten himself into this time?

“Good, you’re awake, Potter,” Bellatrix’s voice came from the other side of the door. The door opened and Bellatrix and Wormtail entered the room. With a quick flick of Bella’s wand, Harry flew into the wall opposite the door. With a hurried spell, the skin on Harry’s arm burst into boils, very painful boils that stung and oozed pus. Wormtail laughed, his voice filled with spite.

“Our Lord wants you to enjoy your time here completely,” Peter said, as a spell he had cast hit Harry. Harry watched his other arm burst into un-quenchable fire that slowly burned his skin away. He was too

shocked to react. The pain reached his brain and he couldn't think of anything else. Bella laughed.

She removed the boils and countered the flames. Harry felt relief at first, but then he remembered the day before. She was just healing him to torture him further. With a quick spell Harry lost all sight. Things started to hit him, small at first, but slowly the size increased. A larger object hit Harry's right temple and he blacked out.

"No, no, Potter," Bella's mockingly sweet voice said. "You cannot leave the party yet. You're the guest of honor. Crucio!" Harry keeled over and puked as the Cruciatus ripped his body apart.

"Stop that, Bella," Peter whined. "Master does not want us using the Unforgivables on him." Harry hoped fervently that Bellatrix would listen to the scumbag. But she didn't. She kept the curse on Harry until he felt himself reach the brink between sanity and insanity. That's when the pain subsided.

When his vision cleared, he saw a new Death Eater speaking with Bella. He was rather angry, but Bella seemed unperturbed. Slowly, the words they were speaking started to make sense and Harry understood their conversation.

"You still shouldn't have," the voice said to Bellatrix.

"I don't care. The master will never know. Now what do you want?"

"Our Lord wishes to speak with Potter," the voice answered.

"Get up, Potter," Bellatrix commanded the bruised boy. Harry stood on shaky knees. He almost fell face forward, but he caught himself in time. He followed them out of the room and through the maze of hallways. Harry tried to memorize the route, but there were too many turns.

Bellatrix pushed Harry into the room and Harry fell flat on his face. Voldemort laughed. "I have good news for you, Potter," Voldemort said. "I have decided to share my secret with you. Do you wish to know it?"

Harry thought about that. Of course he wanted to know, but after he found out what it was, would he still want to know? He had a feeling that the answer was no, but Harry nodded anyways. Nothing could be worse than the guilt of leaving Ginny behind.

“My most faithful servant, Lucius, has managed to kill the blood traitor that goes by the name of Arthur Weasley,” Voldemort finally said. Just moments before hundreds of miles away, Ginny had found out the same news and Harry felt her pain engulf him. This would devastate her! He wouldn’t be there to help her through it. This was entirely his fault.

Slowly, Harry remembered the false vision of Sirius being tortured. That had been a mind game that Voldemort had played. Maybe this was one as well. “I don’t believe you!” Harry finally said. Voldemort laughed.

“Of course you don’t,” he replied. “Come here!” Harry wouldn’t budge. “Come here or I’ll make you!” Harry stayed rooted to his spot. “Very well.” Harry first flew into the door (I think that pop was a rib, he mused to himself.) and then he slid to Voldemort’s feet. Voldemort levitated Harry’s head until it was level with his own and then said, “Legilimens!”

Harry fought for control of his mind. It was his last sanctuary and Voldemort wasn’t going to violate it. Harry felt his shields withstand Voldemort’s attacks. He’d get through this. He wouldn’t let Voldemort in. Then, slowly at first, but with increasing speed after that, the shields crumbled. Harry felt his mind open to the Dark Lord.

Harry watched himself walking towards his friends. They were sitting next to the lake, talking quietly amongst themselves. Harry approached them and he heard them beg to hear the Prophecy. Harry watched as he led them to the Room of Requirement. They sat there quietly, waiting for Harry to speak. “The one with the power to vanquish...”

No! Harry yelled at the force that was Voldemort. You are not finding out about that. With that, Harry shoved Voldemort from his mind. Voldemort looked at the shaking form that was Harry Potter.

“Take him away!” Voldemort commanded. “And weaken him.” Harry stifled a groan. This wasn’t going to be fun.

Harry hated extremes. This was the simple conclusion he had come to during the torture he had endured. He groaned as he stretched his battered and bruised muscles. He had endured scorching heat and freezing cold; dehydration and drowning; hung by his wrists and by his ankles; deafening silence and deafening noise; encroaching darkness and blinding light; not to mention all the spells that just caused pain.

However, Harry also looked forward to these times of pain. It served as a distraction from his guilt. He had just abandoned Ginny, and now she was facing the grief of losing her father. He wasn’t at her side, helping her through this difficulty as she had helped him so often in the past. He had turned his back and left her. She didn’t deserve to be treated like that!

Overhearing a conversation, Harry had found out that Lucius had been sent to Azkaban for the murder of Mr. Weasley. The courts had added yet another life sentence to his long list of life sentences. Harry was glad he hadn’t seen the man while he was here, wherever here was. Lucius could stay locked up in Azkaban until the dust of his bones had rotted away for all Harry cared, and it still wouldn’t be enough.

Harry glanced about the room. He hurried over to the door and grabbed the rotten bread from the ground. He couldn’t say much about the food that they served him here. But at least he did get something to eat and drink, even if it was disgusting. What Harry would give for a decent meal prepared by Dobby or Mrs. Weasley?

Harry knew that his time alone was limited. Any moment now, a Death Eater would visit and make their presence felt. Harry only knew a few of his torturers by name, but he had them pegged by favorite spells and their voices. He had others named by physical features.

Still others by certain tendencies, like biting their nails or picking their noses. Nose Picker was the second worst torturer; Bellatrix was the obvious first.

Today was Thursday, because Bellatrix had told him that yesterday was Wednesday. Harry had planned to be throwing a party for the D.A. members on this day. Yesterday, he was going to play a pick up game of Quidditch with the Slytherins. But in reality, he had spent and would spend both days in torture. What had he been thinking? Not only had he left Ginny when she most needed him, but he had put himself in a hopeless situation.

Harry heard a key turn in the door. Scarface entered the small cell and looked at Harry, who was now lying on the ground. Harry called him Scarface because a ragged scar ran from his left temple, through his lips and down the right side of his throat. "Our master wishes to see you," he commanded Harry.

"Voldemort isn't my master," Harry responded cheekily. The man flicked his wand and sent Harry into the far wall.

"Don't you dare use our master's name," the man responded. "As long as you're here, you will call him your master. Now, get on your feet or I'll take you to him by force!"

Harry stood and followed Scarface out of the cell. Wormtail was waiting outside and the two Death Eaters walked Harry through the hallways and up to Voldemort's throne room. Harry worked at remembering the way through the twisting corridors. He was slowly remembering more and more. He knew that soon he'd be able to get to Voldemort's throne room without anyone's help.

"Ginny!"

Ginny turned to see who had called her name. It was Cho. The Ravenclaw was waving for her to come over to their table. Ginny excused herself, grabbed her bag, and walked slowly over to their table.

Life had been hard since Monday. Life had been really hard. The Slytherin vs. Gryffindor game had been cancelled, much to Ginny's

annoyance. She needed something to distract her, even if it was as silly as Quidditch. A game was something that required her undivided attention. Something that would let her forget her worries, her grief for a few short hours. But it had been cancelled. Maybe this was the reason for her late night decision to hold the D.A. party.

“Yes, Cho,” Ginny answered, having arrived at the table.

“Why is there a meeting tonight?” Cho asked for all the Ravenclaws surrounding her.

“Because Harry wanted one,” Ginny replied. “Do any of you have a problem with that?”

“Don’t you think it’s a little...” Michael paused, thinking for the right word, “Pretentious, having a meeting while the leader is captured?”

“I think it’s exactly what Harry would have wanted,” Ginny replied, her voice icy cold. “He always said that we shouldn’t let Voldemort ruin our lives. We need to live. Even if Harry’s...” Ginny stopped. I’m not going to cry! She thought angrily to herself. “Even if Harry is captured. Now, I’ve got to go. See you tonight.” Ginny left the Great Hall slowly, with her head held high. She wasn’t going to cry with everyone watching.

She made her slow way to the Room of Requirement and paced in front of it three times. The ornately carved wooden door that she had come to love so much appeared. She stepped through into her and Harry’s spot. The storm that raged on the cliff blasted her as she left the castle behind.

Ginny looked around hopelessly. Where was Harry when she needed him? Where was her dad when she needed him? Both were unable to help her right now. In fact, her dad would never help her again. He wouldn’t sit at the table, proudly congratulating her on her O.W.L. scores. He wouldn’t sit proudly in the crowd as she graduated from Hogwarts. He wouldn’t walk her down the aisle and he wouldn’t kiss her goodbye as he gave her to that lucky man. He wouldn’t hold her children. He wouldn’t help her through anything any longer.

Ginny sat at the edge of the cliff and pulled Prongs from her bag. She hugged her knees to her chest along with the stuffed animal Harry had given her only five days before. She bent her head down in the soft fabric of the animal's head and cried.

A hand rested softly on her shoulder and someone sat down next to her. Whoever it was (she didn't care who) pulled her into a hug and Ginny leaned into it, needing the support and comfort. She didn't know how long she cried into this unknown person's shoulder, but the stranger didn't complain.

"You alright, Ginny?" Ron's concerned voice finally asked, as her crying came to an end. Ginny nodded. She had such great brothers. A girl shouldn't, no, couldn't complain about loving prats like her brothers. "You sure you want to continue with the party?" Ginny nodded again.

"Harry will be mad if we don't," Ginny answered. "But, let's just celebrate life. Not the end of the year or something like that. Just being thankful that we're alive and safe." Ron nodded, completely agreeing with her. They sat in complete silence, taking comfort in the presence of the other.

"I miss them," Ginny said softly. "I miss them both."

"So do I," Ron answered, hugging her closer. "So do I."

"Get up boy," Voldemort spat at the pathetic figure that was Harry Potter. "We've only just begun." Harry groaned. His head was pounding, his scar was bleeding, his body was burning, and his Occlumency shields were very, very weak. Voldemort would be able to break them completely and irrevocably today.

Harry got to his knees, still trembling from the last Cruciatus Curse that had torn through his body. He would do his best not to let Voldemort see his weakness. As he got to his feet, Harry tried to reinforce his shields, trying to strengthen them, so that they could withstand one more day of battering. He couldn't let Voldemort know anything. The monster would use that to hurt Harry worse.

“Draco says that your whore isn’t doing so well without you,” Voldemort mocked. The Death Eaters laughed. Harry put a blank mask on his face, but inside he was raging. How dare Voldemort mock her! He felt his mask slip away, to be replaced by a look of the utmost hate and rage. But all Voldemort did was laugh.

“Don’t laugh!” Harry screamed. “Don’t you dare—”

“Legilimens!”

Harry cursed himself as he realized that he had left his shields unprotected. Voldemort now had free reign of his mind and Harry was terrified. What would Voldemort learn?

Harry watched as each of the Weasleys, Hermione, Tonks, Remus, Thia, Dumbledore, and Shacklebolt circled his dream self. It was like viewing a memory in a Pensieve, he was there, but he couldn’t interact with what was going on. He groaned. He did not want Voldemort seeing this old dream.

The limping form of Bill passed Harry once again speaking this time. “He killed us, Harry. He killed each of us slowly, because we were close to you. And only because we were close to you.”

Harry felt the presence that was Voldemort in his head smile. Harry’s scar burst into absolute pain, worse than anything from before. The presence became happier and giddier as each person accused Harry. Charlie burnt to a crisp. Shacklebolt had a hole through his stomach. The twins were torn in a sick rendition of Siamese twins. Tonks tortured to death and Remus having to watch that happen.

Mrs. Weasley, twisted and deformed from spell damage, turned to speak to him next. “The pain I went through as He twisted my body,” Mrs. Weasley said in a slow voice, “fades in comparison to the pain I went through as I was told about the deaths of my sons. I was dead before He started to kill me.”

Voldemort was absolutely beside himself with enjoyment. Harry’s forehead felt as if it had ripped open along his scar. Ron and Mr. Weasley passed by, both killed with the Cruciatus Curse.

Dumbledore killed in battle, an old and wizened man. Thia, Hermione, and Ginny were all broken emotionally.

"He let them... You let them..." Ginny's voice cracked and she broke into sobs. Harry watched his dream self fall to the ground. "How could you let this happen, luv?" she asked, her voice filled with a sense of betrayal.

'What did you let us do, Harry?' Voldemort asked before Bill and Ron could answer.

"You let Him rape my sister!" Bill accused Harry. "You let Him allow his Death Eaters to rape her!"

"They raped Hermione!" Ron screamed from Harry's left. "You let them rape the two most important girls in my life!"

Voldemort's laughter rang through Harry's head. It made Harry's real body keel over in complete pain. Blood flowed freely and quickly from Harry's scar. A Death Eater, who had been given orders to keep Harry alive, moved forward and stemmed the flow. Harry, though, was oblivious to all of that. He was completely immersed in the nightmare, the guilt overwhelming him.

"I'm sorry," he stated from the ground.

"That's not good enough!" Bill yelled back. "It won't bring any of us back!"

Harry gasped in pain as Voldemort left his mind. He lay, panting, trying to recover from the traumatic experience. He could hear Voldemort's cruel laugh. He could sense the questioning glares from the Death Eaters. He looked up at Voldemort carefully, trying to move his head as little as possible. The monster had an evil smile on his smug, serpentine face. Harry shuddered. That could not be good.

Harry rolled over onto his back. Blood from his scar dripped into his eyes, blurring his vision. He rubbed it away, but it was quickly replaced by more blood. The Death Eater healed it again, but he didn't heal it completely. A small amount of blood dripped out of the

top of the scar and weaved its way down his forehead and into his hair.

Harry tried to take a deep, calming breath, but instead he started to cough on the blood in his mouth. He turned back onto his stomach and tried to cough the blood out of his lungs. It wasn't working. The cough only hurt his bruised and broken ribs. He tried to stop coughing, but now that he had started coughing, he couldn't stop.

"Heal him!" Voldemort yelled at the man that was supposed to. "I don't want him to die yet; I'm not through with him." Harry groaned mentally, but it came out as a loud cough. The Death Eater cast a spell and the coughs went away. Another spell, and the ribs knitted back into place. With yet another spell, Harry felt his lungs heal and clear of all blood. He coughed once more, and the blood came flowing out.

"Crucio!" Voldemort cried, but Harry wasn't the target. The Death Eater fell to the ground and Harry felt a small amount of gratitude at not being the one writhing in agony. This made him feel even guiltier, but he didn't think his body could take much more at the moment. "You had orders to keep the boy alive! Why did you stand there, watching him cough to death?"

"I'm sorry, my Lord," the Death Eater groveled. Voldemort waved his hand at the man impatiently and the man crawled back to the other Death Eaters. Harry couldn't help but wonder once more why the Death Eaters wanted to serve Voldemort. It just didn't make sense to him.

"Potter," Voldemort said, turning his attention back to Harry. Harry turned his head slightly, so that he could see Voldemort better. "That was the most interesting dream I have ever had the pleasure of seeing. I had never thought about tearing the blood traitor twins in half like that. You should really look into a career as an evil wizard."

Harry slowly propped his head on his arms. It took quite a bit of effort on his part and the Death Eaters watched him curiously. They weren't sure what he was up to. Harry knew exactly what though. He wasn't

going to let Voldemort get away with any of that without some retaliation.

“What are you up to, boy?” Voldemort asked, amused. Harry looked up at the monster and spat at him. No spit actually hit Voldemort, but he got the message. “I see.” Harry stared into his eyes and then had to look away because Harry could feel Voldemort starting to search his mind. “Well, in that case, Crucio!”

All Harry had time to think was, I’m so glad I’m passing out right now.

Author's Notes:

... i'm sorry said in smallest voice possible... of everything I've ever written this is the only thing I've ever almost un-written... A moment of silence for Author Weasley moment I almost posted this without an A/N (sorry, just so eager to get chapters out) and I stopped myself, this chapter definately needs one...

I wrote the death of Arthur Weasley late one Monday night (right after writing 39, 'cause I knew I'd chicken out otherwise) I typed the last words “I can’t bring the dead back.” and I just stopped... I was talking to Chris and Cassie (the best Aussi friends a girl can ask for) and sent them the little I had written... let's just say they went into shock just as I had... they read it, they talked to me about it, tried to comfort me... I told them why (which I can't tell you, 'cause they are beta's and you are not) and in the end I felt God awful, but when I went to bed I knew I had done the right thing, story wise... The next day I felt awful and really had no one to talk to it about, 'cause I'm the only HP fanatic of my friends... came home re-read what I wrote and felt... well, worse, even though I didn't think it possible...

I'm sorry if I bored you with that little tale, but I'm sure you'll understand that I needed to tell it otherwise, I'd feel even worse... Melinda, if you read this, this is what I was talking about feeling guilty about... There will be no Mr. Weasley to help Harry out at the end of the fic or the end of it's sequal... I feel like crap...

Other note... this chapter has not been beta'ed by Pixie, only (I know confusing) so, there are probably a few more mistakes then normal... I'm sorry for that... Goodnight... well, a better night...

loci

Chapter Forty-One: Click... Sh-keeeeeer...

But you're missing when
I shut out the light.
You're missing when
I close my eyes.
You're missing when
I see the sun rise.
You're missing.
Bruce Springsteen: You're missing

Hermione watched her best girlfriend leave the Great Hall. Ginny didn't look too good without Harry there to help her through her grief. The younger girl had been so disappointed when the Quidditch game had been cancelled. Though several people questioned Ginny's sincerity since then, Hermione hadn't. She, herself, had thrown herself into books, reading texts on the First War. She hoped to find some reference to Voldemort's hide-out, but her hopes weren't high. She used the reading as a distraction. If she wasn't reading, she spent her time worrying and feeling guilty and, often, the grief for Mr. Weasley overwhelmed her.

Hermione glanced over at her boyfriend, who was sitting next to her. Ron wasn't doing so well either. Better than Ginny, but not by much. Harry meant so much to those two, and they had lost their dad on top of that. Life could be so cruel at times.

"Ron, why don't you follow her?" Hermione suggested with a whisper in his ear. Ron looked at her startled. He had a far away expression on his face. "She's going to need you now that Harry's not there to help her."

Ron nodded, but looked completely lost. "Where would she be?" he asked quietly.

"Where would I go if you were captured and my dad died?" Hermione asked softly. Ron thought for a few seconds, still confused. He can be so thick at times, Hermione thought fondly.

"You'd go to the top of the Quidditch stands, far left of the Gryffindor section," Ron answered doubtfully.

Hermione nodded. "And why would I go there?"

"Because that's our spot," Ron answered. Hermione smiled as she watched the light bulb turn on in his head. "So Ginny would go to the Room of Requirement. See you." Hermione laughed as she watched him hurry out of the Great Hall. He's exactly what Ginny needs at the moment, and Ginny's exactly what he needs.

Hermione stood slowly and made her way to the common room, planning to spend the time until those two showed up by reading. She gave the Fat Lady the password (Down with Death Eaters!) and entered the room. She shook her head. The common room was so subdued since last Saturday. Gryffindor had taken quite a hit. Two students kissed, one student missing, two students still in the hospital wing, several students had lost family members, and Harry was captured.

Hermione had never noticed before how important Harry had become to this house. The younger students looked up to him, because he was the Boy Who Lived. Students above the fourth year respected him because of everything they had watched him do over the years. Everyone respected him because he respected them. Harry's mischievous streak got him and others in trouble at times, but mostly, it only ended in laughter. This laughter was missing now. It had been missing several times since the ministry fiasco. But every time it would return with more vengeance than before.

When Harry returned, and he would, the house would come back to life. It would be yet another time the Boy Who Lived had showed the Dark Lord up. It would give the students more enthusiasm. Maybe the first password next year could be "Down with Voldemort."

Hermione laughed. That would never happen. She opened the book she had retrieved from her bookshelf and smiled, remembering the prank Harry had come up with to get her notes. That boy had grown up way too fast. If he hadn't become so mature, he'd be a force to rival the Weasley twins. Harry had always been much more mature

than his age dictated, ever since she had first met him on the Hogwarts Express. She guessed that was the Dursley's fault, but she had no proof.

She sat comfortably on the window seat in her dorm room. Lavender and Parvati hadn't come back from breakfast yet, so it should be a peaceful room to read in. The book was a straightforward Transfiguration text, but Hermione liked it because of its simplicity. It delved into uncomplicated theories of Transfiguration. There was a certain peace that reading this book gave her.

A few hours passed, but Hermione wasn't worried that Ginny and Ron weren't back yet. Those two had lots to catch up on. Hermione turned the last page and read it. At the end was a note she had never seen before. She recognized the hand writing instantly.

Hermione—

I can't believe you let us steal your notes! I figured you'd have some sort of protection spell on the shelf or something like that. Oh well. Because I'll never admit to this crime in person, I figured I should apologize somehow. So: I'm sorry for stealing your notes and wiping your books clean. But if you bring this note to me, I'll deny it all! Well, got to go before Ron gets too suspicious of my absence.

Harry

That complete git! He had apologized all along, she had just not read it. She couldn't help but wonder how they had gotten around the charms on the staircase.

"Hey, Hermione," Ginny's tired voice came from the door. "Do you want to help set up for the D.A. meeting?" Hermione nodded, putting the book away. Hermione couldn't wait to see Harry again. The young man was the backbone of their friendships.

Ginny looked at the D.A. members who were sitting on various stumps and rocks on the top of the cliff. She and Ron had stayed here, except for the short time they had left to get Hermione and supplies for the meeting and. She had had a long talk with Ron, something the two of them hadn't done for a while now. Of course,

they steered clear of talking about Harry or their dad, but there was loads of other things to talk about.

“Earlier I was asked if having a meeting was a bit pretentious on my part,” Ginny started. “Harry had wanted to throw you all a party for your hard work and to celebrate the end of the school year. I know he’d feel awful if you didn’t get your party.”

“We’re going to have a party?” Cho asked, not believing what she heard.

“Of a sort,” Ginny replied. “I figured if the girl who just lost her dad and whose boyfriend is captured can find something to celebrate, then so can you guys. Just trust me, we need to have a party.”

“The first thing we’re going to do,” Ron said taking over, “is to write down one thing worth celebrating on one of these colored bits of parchment.” Ron pointed to the pile of colorful and torn parchment. “Then, take one of the white parchment and write one thing you’re thankful for.”

“Why?” Blaise asked loudly. Ginny could tell he wasn’t thrilled by this idea.

“Look at this school and the student body. They’ve forgotten all the wonderful things to fight for and to celebrate,” Ginny answered. “You once said that Harry and Professor Dumbledore were the backbone of the student body’s will to fight. We want to change that. Every person needs a personal reason to fight. It’s okay to draw strength from those two, but our entire will to live and fight shouldn’t come from them.” Blaise nodded in agreement, but Ginny could tell he wasn’t completely convinced.

“Once we’re all done,” Ginny continued, “Hermione, Ron, and I are going to make a collage of all the pieces of parchment and hang it up in the Entrance Hall as a reminder for the student body. Any other questions?”

“Can I draw instead of write it down?” Dean asked.

“Do whatever you want,” Hermione answered him.

“Do we have to put our names on it?” Hannah asked. Ginny looked at the shy girl and shook her head.

“You don’t have to, but I’d recommend it,” Ginny said. “We should be proud of the things we celebrate and are thankful for. Any other questions?” There was silence. “Alright, here is the parchment, quills, and ink for you to get started.”

Ginny grabbed two sheets of parchment, a quill, and emerald green ink. She had thought long and hard about what she was going to write. Though she wasn’t positive on what she was going to write for her celebrate parchment, she knew what she was thankful for.

I am thankful for still having my mom and all my brothers: Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred, George, and Ron. I don’t know what I’d do without them.

Ginny stared at the light blue parchment she had taken for her celebration. Did she dare write what she wanted? There was the obvious, ‘I want to celebrate life,’ or ‘I want to celebrate because school is out,’ but Ginny wasn’t too thrilled about them either. If she wrote what she wanted to write, others might misunderstand her.

“Can we do more than one each?” Neville asked, interrupting Ginny’s train of thought. Ginny nodded, so Neville took two more pieces of parchment. “What do we do with these when we’re done?”

“Put them in a pile right here,” Hermione answered, placing her own on the table where the supplies were. Ginny smiled at Hermione and then turned her thoughts back to her dilemma.

Who cares what others think, Ginny thought to herself. I’m writing it.

She dipped her quill in the green ink and started to write her thought down. I want to celebrate, because Harry is still alive, even if he got himself captured, the git.

Ginny smiled fondly with thoughts of her git. She knew he was alive. There were two reasons for her believing so: one, she would know if

Harry died and two, Voldemort would want the world to know that he had finally killed the Boy Who Lived. He would brag about it and Harry's death would puncture England's will to resist.

After everyone had finished, they gathered around a small fire that was blazing cheerfully. "We thought story time would be appropriate," Hermione told the group. Marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate bars appeared with a thought of the mind. People started roasting the marshmallows and making sandwiches with pieces of chocolate and graham crackers.

"What kind of stories?" Sephra asked, intrigued.

"Whatever you want to tell," Ron answered. "Made up, real life, ghost stories, romances," Ron pulled a face as he said that and everyone laughed, "action stories, mysteries... You name it and you can tell it. Anyone want to go first?" There was an embarrassed silence around the circle. "Fine, I'll go first." Ron thought for a moment, and Ginny waited to see what story he told.

"There once was a family. This family had a mother, a father, twin sons, and a daughter." Ginny smiled. This had to be based on their family. "Now these twin boys were known for their mischief. They were born pranksters. One time they charmed their sister's teddy bear into a spider while she was holding it. To this day, the poor girl is terrified of the filthy insects."

"Actually, Ron," Ginny broke in. "They aren't insects. Spiders are arachnids, not insects. Eight legs, not six and two body parts not three. And if I remember, it was you who they..."

"My dear sister," Ron said, interrupting her. The D.A. members were laughing at the two siblings. Ginny sighed on the inside. It was good to hear laughter. "This story is completely fabricated, and is not based on fact at all. So, sister mine, please be quiet and let me tell my tale." Ginny clamped a hand on her mouth and waited for Ron to continue.

"As I was saying, these twins were pranksters. Changing people into birds with truffles, enlarging people's tongues with toffees, and things of that nature. This poor girl ended up as the butt of many of their

jokes, and so she suffered through them. The years went by, and the twins headed off to Hogwarts where they caused all sorts of trouble. The sister stayed behind, too young to go. But her time was not wasted. She would have her revenge.

“It was finally time for her to go to Hogwarts as well. She said goodbye to her mum and kissed her father’s cheek and then bounded off for the train. She spent the year making friends and learning all sorts of magic. But still, the opportunity had not presented itself for her to enact her plans. The year ended and the girl returned home.

“One hot and muggy afternoon, her older twin brothers fell asleep in the living room and the girl found that the time had finally come. She snuck into her mother’s room and stole some make-up. Then she crept into her own room and took down a potion that she had researched and brewed. Finally, she tiptoed into the room and started to slowly apply make-up to their faces.” Ginny grinned widely. This was a major reason the twins left her alone and picked on Ron. Everyone in the circle was laughing as Ron described what Ginny did to the twins.

“Then she uncorked her potion and wetted a rag with it. She was careful not to get any on her skin. Then, softly, so not to wake them, she applied it to their faces. The twins didn’t wake and she left the room in triumph. Now, that evening, the family had over many friends to celebrate her birthday. She made them all promise not to say anything to her brothers as a special gift for her birthday.

“This was harder said than done though. The twins awoke and entered the kitchen where their mother was cooking supper. Several guests were talking with her, and they had a hard time keeping a straight face. All through dinner, everyone fought the urge to laugh at the ridiculous faces the girl had drawn. Finally, the brothers caught on and ran into the bathroom. They clasped their hands to their faces in horror. Then, they tried to remove them, but they wouldn’t come loose.

“They ran into the dining room and faced their smug looking sister. ‘Give us the reverse potion, Ginny, or we’ll...” Ron faltered as his audience burst out laughing and drowned him out.

"I thought this wasn't based on fact," a Hufflepuff accused him.

"Nice job, Ginny," Hermione said giving her friend a high-five.

"So I messed up," Ron said, trying to get the attention back to finish his story. After a few more failed attempts, he threw his hands in the air and gave up. "Who's next?" he asked instead. The D.A. members exchanged looks, but before anyone could say anything, Thia raised her hand.

"Can I tell one?" she asked politely. Ginny nodded, and Thia cleared her throat. "This story happened at the end of my sixth year. To protect identities, I'm changing the names. But this really did happen and to some of my good friends." There was silence as Thia thought her story through.

Harry woke up groggy, several hours after his meeting with Voldemort. He found himself in a large dark room with only one window near the ceiling. Harry groaned. The room was from his nightmares. Voldemort had placed him in a room very much like the one in his worst nightmare. The monster had a sick and twisted sense of humor. Harry rolled over and threw up.

"It can't be good to throw up so much blood," he commented out loud, looking at the bloody contents of his stomach. "They aren't healing me enough," Harry added as an after thought. Harry rolled onto his side and looked up at the window. At least he could see the sky now.

He shifted places, trying to get a jagged corner of the floor out of his ribs. However, it didn't help, but instead pushed the object further into his side. Harry sat up and looked at the floor. It was polished smooth. "So what poked me?" he asked rhetorically.

Moving his hands to the bruised side, he felt in each of his pockets, until he found what he was looking for: a solid object. Harry pulled it out and stared at it in disbelief. The snitch Ginny had bought him back on Saturday. He had completely forgotten that he had placed it in his pocket before heading out to see to the dementors.

The snitch stretched its wings and took a short flight. Harry grabbed at it without even thinking. He felt the snitch fight his grasp, trying to free itself from the prison that was his fingers. Harry released it again and watched it dart around in front of him. Before it could become brave and fly away, Harry caught it again. This was how he passed the next few hours, ignoring his surroundings and only concentrating on the Golden Snitch before him.

A loud clank of metal on metal brought Harry back to the present and he tucked the snitch back into his pocket. He didn't want to lose the one thing that had brought him joy in this dark time. Turning to the door, Harry steeled himself for what would enter. Just as he feared, Bill entered, limping, and missing a foot.

Harry was sure that he was awake, and he was sure that this wasn't Bill. He didn't know how, nor did he care to know, but this wasn't the real Bill. Harry watched as his nightmare came to life. Whatever magic they were using, it had Harry fooled. Only his gut instinct told him that these people weren't the real ones. All of his other senses were fooled.

The nightmare continued, Harry even begged for forgiveness as he did in the nightmare. Then, something new happened. The door opened once more and He entered. Voldemort himself, entered the room and walked toward Harry. Those circling Harry shied from Voldemort and Harry felt his stomach heave once more.

An icy probe forced its way through the weak shields Harry had managed to build since their last visit. Within seconds, Voldemort was once more in his head. Instead of focusing on one memory, Voldemort shifted through several of them quickly. Harry knew the monster was looking for any memory with the Prophecy in it, but those were hidden very deep and Harry wasn't even sure he'd be able to find them, once he was free.

"Very well then, Potter. Crucio!" Harry fell to the ground screaming. When the pain subsided, he was alone in his new cell. Those from his nightmares and Voldemort were gone and he was blissfully alone.

You're not alone yet, Potter, Voldemort's sneer came to him. Harry clapped a hand to his scar and bit back a scream. The voice had come from his head. Harry searched his mind, looking for that alien presence, but he couldn't find it.

"Maybe I just imagined it," Harry said aloud, trying to convince himself of the fact. "I just need sleep." So Harry laid down and closed his eyes. Within seconds his wounded and battered body fell into a deep slumber.

"My best friends at Hogwarts were named Daisy and Tam," Thia started after a few moments. "Remember, all names are changed, but mine and well, my brother's 'cause you'd guess it's him. Tam had a secret boyfriend and she wouldn't tell either me or Daisy who he was, though we were free to guess. That spring break she married this boyfriend, because his father was threatening to marry him to a..." Thia stopped saying whatever she was about to and said instead, "a rather mean lady. Daisy and his friend, Can, stood as witnesses. Now a friend of my brother named, White had a crush on Tam. A few weeks later, White asked Tam out on a date to Hogsmeade. Tam, of course declined.

"However, White was persistent and Tam had to tell him that she was going out with Snipe, her husband and White's rival. White and Snipe were what Harry and Draco are for your generation, only a lot nastier. Snipe was more than a little curious about where my brother went every month, and he wanted nothing better than to get White, my brother, Clay who was White's best friend, and Worm expelled."

"Snipe doesn't sound very nice," Hannah Abbot remarked.

"Oh, he was a very nice gentleman," Thia replied. "My brother and his friends brought the worst out of Snipe, and Snipe brought the worst out of them. Right before the full moon, Madame Pomfrey would escort my brother through a hidden tunnel and off school grounds so that he could transform. White told Snipe how to open the secret tunnel, and during the next full moon, Snipe followed. Now, Clay found out about White's information leak. Clay was furious at White and went after Snipe.

“Right before Snipe opened the final door to my brother’s sanctuary, Clay called to him. Snipe, not believing Clay, opened the door and saw a fully transformed werewolf staring at him. Clay stunned Snipe and transformed into an animal. Clay, White, and Worm were animagi, so Clay charged forward and fought off the wolf. Clay was able to re-seal the door and transported Snipe back to Hogwarts grounds.

“From then on, Snipe knew that my brother was a werewolf, and this stunt only intensified the hate between White and Snipe. Snipe ended up becoming a Death Eater, and I’ve always wondered if this was the reason or not.” She became silent and the group looked at her guardedly, not sure what to make of this story. Ginny was just as confused. Snape must be Snipe which means that Snape was married. That didn’t fit at all. Thia had called him a gentleman. That wasn’t right either.

Then again, Snape had stopped saying ‘I see’ when she had asked. He had been polite to Harry, and he stopped picking on Gryffindors. How much did they know about their professor? Not much at all by her estimation. Was Thia right? Was this the reason Snape had become a Death Eater? He had a wife, and Ginny guessed that this Tam wouldn’t have been very pleased with a Death Eater as a husband.

“I want to tell a story,” Sephra said, breaking Ginny’s train of thought. Everyone nodded in approval. “It’s a ghost story, so be ready.”

“There was a boy named Jimmy who was a pathological liar,” Sephra started out. “Jimmy didn’t mean to lie, but he couldn’t help it. One summer day he was listening to the wireless when a news bulletin came on. The voice of a news man came on and Jimmy listened to him with growing fear.

“Two hours ago,” Sephra said in a boring monotone, “a mass-murderer escaped from hit-wizards that were guarding him as he was moved from Azkaban to a French prison to serve his time there. He was last seen near Hogsmeade. The public is to keep a watch out for him and is cautioned not to approach the man as he is dangerous.’

“Jimmy looked out his bedroom window at the distant village of Hogsmeade. A mass-murder loose in Hogsmeade. How cool was that! Nothing exciting ever happened in this boring little village, and it was about time that something did. Some time passed and Jimmy started his Potions essay. Evening descended on the small village.

“‘Jimmy,’ Jimmy’s mum called to him,” Sephra had changed her voice to sound like a mum. “‘I want you to go to the apothecary and buy me a few scoops of newt’s eyes.’

“‘But, mum,’” Sephra said in a whining deep voice, “‘there’s a mass murderer loose in Hogsmeade.’

“‘Jimmy, I know you’re lying and I need those eyes. Go get them, and don’t lie to me anymore.’ Jimmy shook his head.

“‘I’m not lying this time,’ Jimmy pleaded with his mum. ‘It was on the wireless and everything.’

“Jimmy’s mum put a weary hand to her temple. ‘Jimmy, just go.’ She handed him a few galleons and Jimmy left for the apothecary. He walked quickly to the store, and arrived just before they closed. Scooping up some newt’s eyes, he watched out the shop’s window. After paying for them, Jimmy hurried out of the shop and into the dark night.”

Sephra paused and suddenly the Room of Requirement became pitch black, except for the fire before them. “Jimmy started the long way home, moving as quickly as he could in the darkness. About half way home, he heard something.” Sephra clicked her fingers on an empty cardboard box that the room had provided. Then she made a “sh-keeeer” sound deep in her throat, like nails on a chalk board. “It was very faint. But he didn’t hear it a second time, so Jimmy continued.

“Click... Sh-keeeer...

“Jimmy started to walk even faster than before.

“Click... Sh-keeeeeer... Click... Sh-keeeeeer... Click... Sh-keeeeeer...”
Each time she did a set, she made it louder and louder, as if whatever it was was getting closer.

“Jimmy started to run.

“Click... Sh-keeeeeer... Click... Sh-keeeeeer... Click... Sh-keeeeeer”

“Jimmy dropped the eyes and pelted toward home, leaving the clicking monster behind. His mother was surprised when he threw open the front door, panting and out of breath. She was even more surprised when he didn’t have the newt’s eyes and angry when he didn’t have any of the galleons she had given him.

“‘And I suppose you met your mass-murderer on your way home and lost all the change and the eyes,’ she yelled at him sarcastically. Jimmy nodded his head earnestly.

“‘That’s exactly what happened,’ he told her quickly. ‘It made a Click—’

“‘Please, don’t lie to me, Jimmy,’ his mother told him slowly and tiredly. ‘I can’t deal with it tonight. You’re sleeping in the yard without a candle or lamp tonight because you lied to me and stole the money I gave to you.’

“‘But, Mum...’

“‘No “buts,” Jimmy. Please, just go to sleep.’ Jimmy nodded, grabbed a sleeping bag and headed outside. He looked up at the star filled sky, wishing that there was a full moon. At least it wouldn’t rain on him. He snuggled deep in the bag and pulled the bag above his head, blocking out the sounds of the night. But not all the sounds.

“Click... Sh-keeeeeer... Click... Sh-keeeeeer... Click... Sh-keeeeeer”

“The next morning, Jimmy’s mum paid the owl for the paper, before she had even left her bed. Looking at the front page, written in huge letters, ‘Mass-Murderer escapes Hit-Wizards Near Hogsmeade.’ Reading the article, it continued on, saying that the murderer had

grown his nails long and they made a strange clicking sound as he set them down and then an even stranger sound as he dragged them along behind him. Jimmy's mum felt horrible. She hurried down the stairs, through the house, and out the back door. There she fell, dead, from a heart attack.

"Jimmy hung from the tree with nail marks around his neck and face." There was a stunned silence as everyone processed the story.

"That was a good one," someone said to Sephra.

"Thanks. My dad taught it to me," she said, sitting down and taking a drink of water.

"It's not the same without Harry," Cho said sadly.

"It isn't," Blaise agreed.

"I hope he's okay," Zacharias Smith said to the group.

"He is," Ginny replied confidently. "I know he is." Harry looked in horror as members of his club, Dumbledore's Army surrounded him. They were angry with him. But why? What had he done to them? Hadn't they enjoyed their time with him? Harry glanced at each of the wands pointed at him.

Obviously something was the matter. They were angry for a reason. There was a disturbance at the back of the room and three people pushed their way through the ring surrounding him. Harry was relieved to see Ginny, Ron, and Hermione well and in one piece before him. Yet, something wasn't quite right. Something was amiss.

"Can we kill him yet?" Hermione asked Ginny impatiently.

"No, not yet," Ginny snapped back at her, backhanding the girl across the face. "Our master hasn't given the command yet."

"You're not really going to kill me, are you, Gin?" Harry asked her completely hurt and confused. What was the matter here?

"Don't call me that!" she screamed at him, pointing her wand at him. "Crucio!" Harry wasn't sure what hurt more, the spell or the sense of betrayal.

"I want a turn!" Ron begged his sister, as she released Harry from the spell. "It's not fair that you get all the fun!"

"What's the matter, guys?" Harry asked shakily.

"What's the matter?" Hermione repeated. Harry couldn't shake the comparison between Bellatrix and Hermione from his mind at the moment. Something in the way she had said that seemed so Bella-ish. "What's the matter? I hope you understand exactly 'what's the matter' by the time we're through with you! Crucio!"

"It was my turn next, Hermione," Ron argued. "Don't cut!"

"I'll do whatever I want, Ron," Hermione replied, keeping the Cruciatus going. Finally, Hermione removed the curse. Harry rolled over and puked. "Poor, wittle 'arry, can't stomach a Crucio?" She laughed manically, and Harry resisted the urge to throw up again because of it.

"Crucio!" The spell was finally removed and Harry just stared at them, completely bewildered. This time, Harry was sure what hurt more, Ron placing the curse on him. What had happened to them?

"What's gotten into you three?" Harry tried once more. "Why are you so cruel all of the sudden?"

"Do you hear him?" Ginny asked Ron and Hermione unbelievably, turning her back on him. "Do you hear him? What's gotten into us? Let's talk about how he left us. Deserted us. Turned his back on us and left with the Dark Lord. Let's talk about that."

"I did that to save you!" Harry yelled at her back. "I didn't want to leave, I had to leave."

"You could have lied," Ron stated calmly. "Gotten us back and then headed to Hogwarts with us. But no, you had to act the hero and keep your word. You had to leave with the Dark Lord."

"You didn't have to put up with the whispers, the articles, the stares," Hermione continued. "You didn't have to deal with everyone doubting your loyalty or ours. The disappointed looks from professors and the calculating looks from Malfoy and his cronies."

"I had to leave," Harry argued lamely. "But that doesn't explain your behavior. What's the matter?"

Ginny turned around once again and glared at Harry. She took three quick steps forward, pushing up her sleeve. Harry stared at the left forearm she had shoved in front of his face. It couldn't be. It couldn't.

"The... Mark..." Harry stammered, the information slowly filtering through his mind. "His Mark. The Dark Mark. But why?"

"Because you left me!" Ginny screeched at him! "Because I was sick of dealing with the second guessers and waiting for you to return. Because the Order fell apart after you went missing. It's been a year, Potter. A whole year since you left. The world is a different place. A better place."

"Do we get to kill him yet?" Hermione asked, fingering her wand delicately.

"Not yet," Ginny replied. "Our master has not given us the go ahead. We must wait."

Just then another figure pushed their way through the crowd. Malfoy made his appearance known and bowed to Ginny. "Our master sends you a message. You may follow through with the plan."

"As you may have noticed," Ron said, almost conversationally, "you are surrounded by members of the D.A. I hope you still like them when they are through with you."

"I wish we got to do it ourselves," Hermione complained as the four retreated out of the circle. Once they were beyond the D.A. members, they turned around.

"Face me," Ginny commanded the circle. Every member turned to face her automatically. "Kill him," she said dismissively and then turned away from him. As the first hexes and curses hit Harry's body, he felt his mouth move without ever telling it to.

"I'm sorry, Gin! Please forgive me!"

Chapter Forty-Two:

I Hate You, Harry Potter

Blurring and stirring the truth and the lies,
So I don't know what's real and what's not.
Always confusing the thoughts in my head,
So I can't trust myself anymore.

I'm dying again.

Evanesence: Going Under

"Where is he?" Ginny asked Hermione angrily. "He should be back by now." Ginny was livid, her face as red as her hair.

"You know the Order has no clue where he is," Hermione told her friend, trying to calm her down. "We're all worried about him, Ginny, but you can't expect miracles."

"And why can't I?" Ginny yelled right back at Hermione. "Miracles and Harry go hand in hand! He survived when he was one. He saved the Philosopher's stone. He rescued me. He saved Sirius and Peter. He won the Triwizard Tournament and survived the graveyard. He survived the Ministry fiasco. He survived his Christmas duel. His life is a miracle, Hermione!"

"But this time he's in enemy territory, Ginny," Hermione tried to reason with her.

"He decided to go there, Hermione!" Ginny screamed at her. Harry tried to touch her, to reach her, but he couldn't. His hand went right through her. Ginny looked away from Hermione. Harry couldn't see her face, so he moved around her and watched her.

He was surprised to see how vulnerable she was at the moment. She looked so deserted and depressed. Ginny shook her head slowly and Harry watched a guilty look cross her face. What's the matter, Gin? he asked her silently. Ginny shook her head once more, starting to talk again.

"What if he left on purpose, Hermione?" she asked the older girl softly. Harry sat hard on the floor. Did Ginny just ask what he thought she did? She'd never ask that. Never!

"He did leave on purpose, Ginny," Hermione answered. Harry looked at her, surprised. "He bargained for our lives and left to fulfill his half of the bargain. You know that, Ginny." Hermione tried to place a comforting arm around the hurting girl, but Ginny shook her off.

"That's not what I meant, Hermione," she replied. "What if Rita was right all along? What if Harry and You-Know-Who were allies this whole time?" Harry's jaw dropped as Ginny spoke. Hermione was looking at the girl as if she had grown a few horns.

"How can you even think that, Gin!" Hermione cried. Ginny recoiled as if Hermione had hit her.

"Don't call me that!" Ginny shouted at Hermione. "Only Harry has ever called me that!" Hermione opened her mouth to apologize. "Don't, Hermione. Just... just leave me alone!" Hermione gave the furious girl one last look and then left the dorm room.

Ginny turned around slowly, not really looking at anything. Her eyes landed on the window and she walked over to it. She stared out it, searching for something. Harry figured that she was looking for him. Shaking her head angrily and with clenched fists, Ginny turned around to the room.

"I hate him!" she yelled as loud as she could manage. "I hate Harry James Potter!" Harry couldn't move. He couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"It's your fault He killed my family!" Bill screamed at Harry.

"Burnt to a crisp," Charlie mumbled sadly.

"A hole through my gut protecting you," Shacklebolt accused.

"Siamese twins," Fred said in his monotone.

“So funny,” George remarked in a similar monotone.

“She was my life, my all,” Remus said in condemnation, carrying Tonks’ limp body.

“All of my boys and my daughter gone,” Mrs. Weasley cried out.

“Is this how you repay us for our friendship?” Ron asked, the anger dripping from the words.

“Why didn’t you protect my family, your family?” Mr. Weasley asked, confused.

“I failed you, I failed the world,” Dumbledore said mournfully.

“Do you recognize us?” Hermione asked, but in a defeated, pitiful way.

“There were some things worth dieing for, and I thought you were one of them,” Thia said, with a sad shake of her head.

“I hate you, Harry James Potter!” Ginny shouted at Harry, bring him to his knees. “I hate you with every ounce of my soul!”

“Hey, Ron,” Hermione said as Ron’s arms encircled his waist. “How are you?” Harry smiled as his best friends exchanged a kiss, only slightly mortified by the sight. Harry could put up with the sight because they were happy. The two walked up to the boy’s dorm room for some privacy.

“I’ve been a whole lot better,” Ron answered. “Nothing is the same without Harry around. And my dad’s dead and I’m not really over that shock. It doesn’t seem real any of this. It’s like I’ll wake up and find out it was just a horrible dream.”

“Agreed,” Hermione said. “For your and Ginny’s sake, I hope this is just a dream.”

“What about your sake?” Ron asked confused and concerned by her words.

Hermione decided to distract Ron with a kiss. Harry felt his cheeks blush red and turned his back as they started to snog in the empty boy's dorm. He wished that he could leave, but when he tried to exit out the door he couldn't. The longer he had to listen the more his cheeks burned. He didn't want to even think about his two best friends snogging, yet here he was forced to listen to it.

"Whoa," Ron said breathlessly. Harry was relieved that the sounds had stopped. He turned around slowly and saw Hermione finish pulling her shirt down. "I don't want the first thing Harry does when he gets back to be skinning me alive."

"Huh?" Hermione asked absentmindedly.

"Him being your brother and all," Ron explained to her.

"I don't need an older brother," Hermione snapped back at him. "I can look after myself, thank you very much."

"That's not what I meant," Ron said quickly, trying to pacify her. "I just meant that Harry's your older brother, just like I'm Ginny's."

"Well, I don't need one," Hermione replied, standing up angrily. "When will you two learn to just let me protect myself? I don't need a knight in shining armor! I don't want one!" Harry looked at her, his mouth agape at her words. He had always thought Hermione found it comforting to know that he'd look after her as an older brother.

"Sorry to bring it up," Ron shouted back, letting his temper get the best of him. "It's just his way to show that he cares!"

"I don't need his love anymore than yours!" Hermione screamed back.

"Is that how you truly feel?" Ron asked yelling just as loud as she was. Harry, though, noticed that he had paled considerable. Harry felt the same way. Hermione didn't need their love?

"That is exactly how I feel," Hermione told him angrily, though there was a chill in her voice. Ron's mouth dropped and he tried to say something, but he couldn't get his mouth to work properly. "I'm going,

Ron, and we are through.” Ron and Harry stared at the door that had just been slammed.

“Merlin,” Ron muttered. “I never thought I’d actually hate Harry, but I do for what he just did.”

“I wish he were here,” Ginny mumbled as she, Ron, and Hermione placed the final touches on the collage. They stepped back from the hanging poster and surveyed their handiwork. “I wonder what he would have written had he not gone with Voldemort.”

“Who knows,” Ron answered quietly. “But I bet he wouldn’t have been thankful for older brothers.” Ginny smiled at the half-hearted attempt at a joke. Neither she nor Ron was looking forward to the funeral in two days. They were leaving Hogwarts in the morning, along with all the students, and the day after attending their father’s funeral, unlike the others.

“He would have probably put his friends down as the thing he was most thankful for,” Hermione said quietly. “And family as the reason to celebrate.”

“Probably,” Ginny said thoughtfully. This was the Ginny Harry was used to seeing. He took one step forward and tried to touch her. His hand went right through her. Ginny shivered and looked around wildly. She was positive that Harry was nearby.

“What’s the matter, Ginny?” Ron asked alarmed. His sister had paled considerably. She pulled her robes closer to her body, even though the day was extremely hot.

“Nothing,” Ginny replied. “Nothing at all.”

“I can’t believe he just deserted us like that,” Neville spoke to his dorm mates. “I was so sure he was on our side.”

“Same here,” Seamus agreed. “Guess he had us all fooled.”

“The bloody traitor tried to comfort me after my family was killed,” Dean told them, horrified. “He was the one to order their deaths.”

"I feel bad for Ginny," Neville said, his concern evident in his voice. "After the Prophet printed the article with Harry's letter blasting Muggle-borns, Muggles, and 'blood traitors', she hasn't been the same. I told the bastard not to hurt her."

"After everything Ron, Hermione, and Ginny did for him," Seamus started conspiratorially, "you'd think the boy would have some decency."

"He's a lying, cheating scum bag," Dean answered. "It isn't possible for him to have a consc—"

The door slammed opened and the last resident of the room entered. He noticed the sudden silence and scowled. Throwing himself on his bed, he laughed bitterly. "Talking about how that freak hoodwinked us all?" Harry gaped at Ron, along with the other occupants. "I just came back from comforting Ginny. I have no respect for the bloody idiot. He has Hermione, Ginny, and my mum in a right mess, and he's betrayed the trust of everyone I love. He's a bloody git. He's worse than Snape and Malfoy and Pansy rolled up into one. Make's me wonder about Snape's loyalties once again."

"How is Ginny?" Neville asked concerned.

"The bloody bastard broke her heart," Ron answered dangerously. "When I get my hands on him, I'm going to rip out his heart and see how he likes it."

"That's the spirit," Dean agreed. "I feel like cutting in several curse scars for him. See if that makes him more famous."

"I knew my mum was always right about him," Seamus, muttered. "Insane and looking for attention."

"Well, he has ours now," Ron said. "And when we meet up with him once again, he's not going to forget about it soon after."

"Mum!" Ginny cried out. She ran to the open arms of Molly Weasley and clung to her. This was the first time Ginny had seen Molly after Arthur's death. Both sobbed silently, feeling the missing presence. They weren't the only two crying on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. There had been

many deaths that Saturday, and many before and after. Parents were glad to be reunited with their children, and the children were glad their parents were alive.

Molly broke from the hug and pulled Ron into one as well. The boy didn't cry, but a tear or two streamed down his face. It was obvious that the boy didn't want to appear weak, but he was broken on the inside.

"Molly, we need to be going," Remus told the woman softly. Molly nodded and herded her children off of the platform and into Muggle London. They walked the short distance to number twelve Grimmauld Place. Ginny hung back to the end of the group, not wanting to enter the old Black house. Sensing her trepidation, Remus walked next to her.

"I hate this," Ginny told the man silently. Harry had to agree. Not only did he hate the house, he was so confused. What was real and what was not. "Why'd you let him go with Voldemort?"

"Because I promised myself not to interfere," Remus answered. "To start treating you guys as adults."

"How is that interfering?" Ginny asked, her temper at the surface.

"Because Harry made that bargain and he had to fulfill it, whether we like it or not," Remus replied. "I had no clue that he was going to bargain himself. If I had, I wouldn't have let him."

"I miss him," Ginny said, barely above a whisper.

"I do too, Ginny," Remus answered, holding the door for her. Ginny entered the house. Harry watched as the memories washed over her. He knew when the panic took hold, and wasn't surprised when she bolted for the door; Remus was though. Ginny was in the middle of the street before anyone knew it. She sat down and pulled her legs to her chest.

Ron walked out to her, carrying a stuffed animal. Harry smiled sadly as he recognized Prongs. Ron handed the stag to her and Ginny hugged it close. Harry tried to reach her, but once again his hand went through her. Ginny shivered, but didn't look around.

"What's the matter, sis?" Ron asked sitting next to her. Ginny shook her head, but Ron just waited. "I hate the house too, Ginny, but it's our home now and we had better get used to it."

"I can't live there," Ginny told him hysterically. "There are too many bad memories there. Christmas when Dad was at St. Mungo's, Sirius, last Spring Break. Memories of Harry and Dad. It's just too much. I can't take it."

Tonks sat on Ginny's other side. "I'll see what I can do, but maybe you can spend a few weeks at my place. Maybe Hermione can come over and Ron." Ginny looked at the woman thankfully. "But I can't promise anything until I talk to Dumbledore."

"Your whore is staying at the old Black place," Voldemort said with triumphant gleaming from his eyes. "But she's moving to that Mudblood's house. The wards there won't be as hard to destroy. We'll just wait until she's there before we invite her to the party." The nearby Death Eaters laughed. "I'm sure you'll be looking forward to that day, Draco." There was more crude laughter, and Harry felt himself gag.

"Of course, my Lord," Draco replied smoothly. "Though I would like some alone time with Potter."

"Very well," the monster replied. "Take the boy back to his cell and don't kill him. I'm not through with him yet." Harry groaned as Malfoy threw him into walls on the way back. Though Voldemort had been in and out of Harry's head, the man had not found the Prophecy

Harry knew he should be relieved that Voldemort hadn't found out. However, hiding the Prophecy meant hiding it from himself as well and Harry couldn't remember what it contained. Whatever it was, it was important that Voldemort not learn it, and Harry was positive that he wouldn't learn it from him.

"Well, Potter, don't say I didn't warn you," Malfoy said icily. "But I did tell you that you picked the wrong side and see where it has led you: in the basement of my Manor. And I can do exactly as I please with you." Malfoy laughed viciously and Harry tried to stand. "No, I want you on your knees." With a quick flick of his wand, Malfoy had both of Harry's legs broken. Harry fell flat on his face. Malfoy laughed again.

"I've been waiting for this day since first year," Malfoy spat at Harry. "Ever since you turned down my invitation of friendship. How different we would both be if you had only accepted it."

"Don't blame your choices on me," Harry countered. "You're the one who made them."

"But you were the cause, and my life is the effect," Malfoy informed Harry. "Too late now. I'm going to enjoy the next few hours." And he did. By the time Malfoy left, Harry was a bloody mess. The Death Eater Harry had nicknamed 'Healer' entered and fixed Harry up quite a bit. When the man left, Harry's eyelids were heavy.

"I'm not going to sleep," he commanded himself. "I'm going to stay awake. I'm not sleeping. I'm not going to let Voldemort screw with my head any longer. I'm not going to sleep." Harry wasn't sure when his eyelids finally closed, but he knew when the dreams started.

"Draco, wait for me!" Ginny shouted to the Slytherin. Draco paused, a malicious smile on his face. "I thought you were leaving without me."

"Never," Draco smiled, taking Ginny's hand and leading her down the path toward the waiting carriages. Harry cracked his knuckles, but he knew he wouldn't be able to punch the slime bag. "Life would not be as interesting without you." He handed her up into the carriage and Harry got on with them.

"I'm glad the Dark Lord finally took care of Potter," Ginny said in a bored voice as if they were talking about the weather. "I was getting tired of playing the role of his girlfriend."

"Let's not talk of him then," Draco said, pulling Ginny into a very passionate kiss and embrace. Harry waited, impatiently, but he couldn't watch the girl of his dreams get groped by the little pervert or watch her grope him back.

"I'm so glad our master took care of Potter," Ginny said once more, before climbing onto Draco's lap and straddling him.

"Tell me what it is, boy!" Voldemort screamed at the bound form of Ron. Harry tried to move forward to help his best friend, but couldn't. He tried to yell, to take the attention away from Ron, but couldn't.

"I won't," Ron got out, even though his mouth was filled with blood.

"You won't," Voldemort repeated dangerously quiet. "Crucio! Don't take that insolent tone with me, boy. I know many ways to stretch out your death."

Voldemort released Ron from the spell, and he sagged against the chains that were holding him up. "I can't tell you," Ron finally said. "He never told us the exact wording."

"Crucio!" Voldemort growled. "Don't lie to me either; I know the Potter boy told you. Now, what is it?" Voldemort asked again, releasing Ron once more.

"If you know he told me, then you should know what it is," Ron replied in an annoying monotone. Harry had to smile, even if it would earn Ron more torture (for Harry knew by experience) telling off Voldemort held a certain amount of thrill and enjoyment for Harry. Knowing that Ron had the guts to do it as well, proved Ron was a true Gryffindor.

"Bella, have fun with the boy," Voldemort commanded. "I'll be back when he is more willing to talk. Just remember as your sanity starts to waver, Weasley, this is all Potter's fault."

All my fault, Harry echoed silently as he watched Ron go through the torture that made up his life at the moment. All my fault.

Harry glanced around at the unfamiliar surroundings. About twenty or so witches and wizards stood in front of a carefully constructed funeral pyre. Harry recognized several Order members, many

Ministry officials, and friends of the Weasleys. However, he couldn't see any of the Weasleys. His curiosity was soon quenched as Remus, Tonks, Shackbolt, and Emmeline Vance carried the body of Arthur Weasley on a stretcher. Following in line was Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Charlie, George, Fred, Ron, and Ginny. All were shedding tears, though Molly and Ginny were crying the hardest.

The four bearers carefully set Arthur's body on the funeral pyre. Bill stepped forward to address the crowd. "Thank you for coming to the funeral of my father, Arthur Vian Weasley. You were his friends and knew him as well as we did. His loss hurts us all. His loss affects us all. He will be missed by many. I will miss him. But let us join together in our grief and in that way give each other comfort." Bill's words sounded like ceremonial words; words that these witches and wizards had heard more than a few times in their lives. Bill turned his back to the crowd and placed something along side his father. Harry moved closer and saw that it was a model sarcophagus, the mummy included.

"Thank you for coming to the funeral of my husband, Arthur Vian Weasley," Mrs. Weasley said in a soft but strong voice. "He was a man filled with love. He let his heart rule his mind, and though at times this led him into trouble, it never led him wrong. I will miss him. But let us join together in our grief and in that way give each other comfort." She turned her back to the crowd and placed a small parchment heart next to him. Harry read, 'To my true Valentine' written in the hand of Mr. Weasley.

"Thank you for coming to the funeral of my father, Arthur Vian Weasley," Charlie said his grief evident in his voice. "He was a man who didn't back down from a fight. He stood up for what he believed in and gave his life for it. He believed that all goals could be accomplished, no matter what obstacles were in the way. I will miss him. But let us join together in our grief and in that way give each other comfort." Charlie turned his back to the crowd and placed something next to his father. Harry smiled as he looked at a worn down stuffed dragon.

"Thank you for coming to the funeral of my father, Arthur Vian Weasley," George told the crowd, his smile playing at his lips. "He was a man after every prankster's heart. The little things made him smile. He appreciated a good laugh more than all the gold in the world. Someone else's laughter brought a smile to his face. I will miss him. But let us join together in our grief and in that way give each other comfort." George turned his back to the crowd and placed something small among the small pile of gifts. Harry walked closer and realized that it was a ton-tongue toffee, once thought to be completely destroyed.

"Thank you for coming to the funeral of my father, Arthur Vian Weasley," Fred started softly. "He had many joys in life. The one that we will all remember most fondly is the joy he found in learning about the Muggle world. As the Muggle-borns he counted as friends can tell you, he was most enthusiastic about anything concerning Muggles. Well, if you spent anytime with him in the Muggle world, you know just how much it meant to him. It defined who he was. I will miss him. But let us join together in our grief and in that way give each other comfort." Fred turned his back to the crowd and placed a small plaque next to the others. Written on it were the words 'My First Battery', and glued onto it was a beaten up battery.

"Thank you for coming to the funeral of my father, Arthur Vian Weasley," Ron started in a perfectly controlled voice. Harry knew from experience that Ron wasn't alright at all. "My father was the best anyone could ask for. He took in my friends over school holidays. He let me stay at Hogwarts for others. He bought tickets for my best friends so that we could go to the Quidditch World Cup together. He was such a great dad that he even took in my best friend as a son when that was all my friend ever wanted. I will miss him. But let us join together in our grief and in that way give each other comfort." Ron turned his back to the crowd and placed his Quidditch World Cup ticket among the collection.

"Thank you for coming to the funeral of my father, Arthur Vian Weasley," Ginny started softly. Harry moved closer so that he didn't have to strain to hear her comments. "Though my father wasn't one to say much, he always made sure to let us know how he felt. I learnt long ago that a disappointed look hurt more than any yelling or

punishment could. I learnt that he had an angry look and thankfully that was never directed at me, because it was terrifying to see. I learnt that he had a look filled with worry, and that made my insides squirm with worry as well. I learnt that he had a look filled with love, and that made me feel safer than any hug could. But it was his look of pride, pride in me, pride in his sons, and pride in his family that I'll remember the most. I will miss him. But let us join together in our grief and in that way offer each other comfort." Ginny turned her back to the crowd and left a small teddy bear with the other offerings. Harry moved to hug her, but his arms passed right through her. Ginny shivered and looked around casually as if she knew he was there.

"Two of my sons were not able to make it," Mrs. Weasley said stepping forward. "Percy is spending time in Azkaban for his choice of following someone blindly. Harry, Ron's best friend and my son, is currently unable to be here because he chose to bargain his freedom for Ron, Ginny, and Hermione's lives. He followed the example Arthur showed and stood up for what he believed. He, too, is now facing those consequences." Mrs. Weasley turned her back to the crowd and placed a picture that had been taken before the Quidditch World Cup. In it all the Weasley family, including Hermione and Harry, were present. Joining the line with her family, she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

Bill pulled a burning torch from the ground and walked to the funeral pyre. He stood on the opposite side from the crowd and opened his mouth to speak. "We now returning the magic that made you back to the world which gave you life. We will remember you until we join you on the other side. May your journey not take you farther from us than it must. Until we see you again." With that, Bill lit the pyre and stepped back to comfort his crying mother, very aware that he was now the head of his family.

"There you are, my dear," Bellatrix's evil voice rang in the room. Harry watched as Ginny struggled away from the woman. "I have a little present for you." Bellatrix pulled a cloth away to reveal the severed head of Ron. Ginny screamed, deathly white.

"You don't like it?" Bellatrix asked feigning hurt. "Well, you're definitely not going to like Lucius' gift or Pettigrew's gift either." The

two men in question stepped into the room and revealed their gifts. Ginny's screams continued, only Harry could tell that something in her mind had snapped. Hermione's head was on one platter, and Mrs. Weasley's was on the other.

"I didn't think you would," Bellatrix said smiling. She laughed and her laughter was just as insane as Ginny's scream.

Harry walked into a room that was both comfortable and calming. He took a seat next to the fire and looked around. The room reminded him of the Burrow, with its chaos and its seemingly rightness. This place felt like home.

"Harry?" a surprised voice asked him from across the room. Ginny entered, though she was many years older.

"Of course, Gin," Harry answered. "Who else would I be?"

"Just a moment. Ron! Hermione! Get in here!" Ginny shouted out into the hallway. The two in question entered, looking older and more tired than he remembered. They stopped and their mouths dropped. Ron, however, took his wand out at the same time.

"Who are you?" he asked haltingly, as if he didn't want to hear the answer.

"Harry," Harry answered. "Who else could I be?"

"Well, Harry," Hermione started to explain. "You've been missing for years now. And the only way I know it's you is by your voice, though it's a little deeper and hoarser than I remember." Harry stood and moved to look at himself in the mirror hanging on the wall. He was just as surprised as they were to see the multiple scars that crisscrossed his face. It was impossible to see the old lightning scar among the hundreds that now adorned his face. He looked down at his hands and was surprised to see that he was missing one full arm and his other was adorned in a similar way as his face. Though he had both legs, his right leg was much stiffer and he limped on it. 'You've been missing for years,' Hermione had said. Well, the years hadn't been kind to him.

He looked back at his friends and noticed several things quickly. Ron wasn't holding Hermione's hand and they didn't have a wedding ring. This thought made Harry look at Ginny's hands. She wore his mother's ring on her right hand, but on her left...

"Is that a wedding band?" Harry asked her stupidly. Ginny nodded.

"It's been nearly 20 years, Harry," Ginny answered. "I had to move on. When Voldemort disappeared and you didn't come back, we assumed the worst. It took me a long time to accept it, but eventually I too believed that you were dead and not coming back."

"To whom?" Harry asked stunned.

"Neville," Ginny answered simply. "He was so kind to me after you disappeared and he waited so patiently. Other guys were hitting on me the next year and between me, Ron, and Neville, they learnt not to."

"How long?" His mind couldn't get around the fact that Ginny was married and not to him.

"About 13 years now," Ginny answered. "Our eldest starts at Hogwarts this fall."

"Your eldest," Harry echoed. "What about you two?" Harry asked turning his attention to his best friends.

"We fell apart the year after you disappeared," Hermione answered. "Then we graduated and went our separate ways. We only see each other when we visit the Longbottom clan."

"Which is about once a year, maybe less," Ron answered as if this made complete sense. "My wife died in child birth two years ago. Our eldest is sixteen already. I have five other children."

"What about you, Hermione?" Harry asked tiredly. This wasn't the future he had seen coming.

"Well, I married Viktor Krum. You do remember him, don't you?" Harry nodded. "We don't have any children. What with my research and his Quidditch career, we never got around to having a family."

"Oh," Harry answered quietly. "I never thought about this as a future for the four of us."

"We never thought of a future that didn't include you, Harry," Ron responded. "We weren't ready for it and, well, this happened," he finished waving at the room vaguely.

"Not exactly what we planned, but we're happy where we are," Ginny said with a smile. "Harry, our eldest son, is so excited to go to Hogwarts and be a Gryffindor just like his namesake," she informed him with a loving smile on her face. "How are you, Harry? You don't look well."

He didn't feel well either. This wasn't the way it was supposed to end. He and Ginny were to live happily ever after together. Ron and Hermione were supposed to live happily ever after together. He had somehow survived, and yet, nothing he had fought for was possible any longer. It wasn't fair.

"Harry, are you alright?" Ginny asked once again, alarmed this time. Harry nodded his head without even thinking. "Some things never change," she added with a faint smile. "Harry, I think you should sit down."

"I'm fine," Harry grumbled, waving her off.

"Dear, where are you?" Neville called down the hall.

"I'm down here, love," Ginny responded. Neville entered, carrying a six or seven year old girl in his arms. This girl looked exactly like her mother and Harry couldn't look at her for long.

"Who's this?" Neville asked sharply.

"It's Harry, love," Ginny answered. "Let me hold Molly for a bit." She gave her husband a hug and took the little girl from him.

“Why, so it is,” Neville said with a laugh. “Good to see you again, Harry Potter.” He stuck out a hand to shake with. Harry stood staring at the little girl. This wasn’t right. It wasn’t fair. He drew his wand and before he realized what exactly was happening, the little girl named for her grandmother was dead in her mother’s arms. Harry turned his wand to Neville and killed him just as easily. Next came Ron, then Hermione, then the boy who ran down the stairs; their Harry maybe? And last, but not least, Ginny, the one and only girl of his dreams. “It’s your fault He killed my family!” Bill screamed at Harry.

“Burnt to a crisp,” Charlie mumbled sadly.

“A hole through my gut protecting you,” Shacklebolt accused.

“Siamese twins,” Fred said in his monotone.

“So funny,” George remarked in a similar monotone.

“She was my life, my all,” Remus said in condemnation, carrying Tonks’ limp body.

“All of my boys and my daughter gone,” Mrs. Weasley cried out.

“Is this how you repay us for our friendship?” Ron asked, the anger dripping from the words.

“Why didn’t you protect my family, your family?” Mr. Weasley asked, confused.

“I failed you, I failed the world,” Dumbledore said mournfully.

“Do you recognize us?” Hermione asked, but in a defeated, pitiful way.

“There were some things worth dying for, and I thought you were one of them,” Thia said, with a sad shake of her head.

“I hate you, Harry James Potter!” Ginny shouted at Harry, bring him to his knees. “I hate you with every ounce of my soul!”

“Harry, your worst nightmares are of your own making,” Voldemort laughed as Harry came round.

“What day is it?” Harry asked incoherently. Voldemort and the surrounding Death Eaters laughed at him.

“It is the second Thursday since you arrived, Potter,” Voldemort finally answered. “It has been exactly one week since I broke into your mind. And you and I have been torturing it since.”

“Bite me,” Harry remarked calmly to the monster. This caused the room to erupt into more laughter. Harry took a calming breath and then stood up, cursing his weak legs.

“Do not hurt yourself, Potter,” Voldemort cautioned him. “We don’t need you to overtax yourself. Now, Harry, I need to know the exact contents of that Prophecy. So, if you’ll be so kind and tell me it?”

Harry glared at Voldemort and remained silent. He wasn’t going to let Voldemort know that he had no clue. It was the only thing keeping him alive at the moment. Voldemort wanted that Prophecy and he, Harry, was the only means for Voldemort to get it.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Voldemort remarked deadly serious. “Potter, you want to live, I want the Prophecy. Let’s trade one for the other.”

“I don’t buy that for a second,” Harry replied. “You’d never let me go.”

“That may be,” Voldemort agreed. “But I feel no qualms about killing you. If you don’t give it to me, then I’ll kill you. If you do give it to me, I might let you live another day.”

“I don’t like the might in that sentence,” Harry responded insolently. Every Death Eater either took a step closer or cracked their knuckles angrily.

“Crucio!” Voldemort hissed vehemently. Harry fell to the ground, screaming out loud. Somehow his mind got his mouth to form words.

“Stop, just stop!” Harry screamed, surprising many of the Death Eaters. None of them had heard a victim scream fluently before. “Damn it! Stop! Please, stop!” Voldemort lifted the curse.

“What is the Prophecy?” Voldemort asked once again. Harry couldn’t get his mouth to form any words, so he just concentrated on stopping his twitching body. He wouldn’t be able to take too much more of the Cruciatus Curse. What would it like to be insane? Harry wondered. To be like Neville’s parents? Or maybe I’ll get lucky and die.

“One more time, Potter. What is the Prophecy?” Voldemort asked, clearly annoyed. “Don’t make me kill you.”

“And if you do,” Harry finally mumbled out, “then the Prophecy goes to the grave with me. Just like whatever secret the Carrigans knew.”

“How do you know about that?” Voldemort asked waspishly.

“I’ve watched enough of your going on’s to know all about you,” Harry replied, drawing strength from Voldemort’s apparent unease.

“I see,” Voldemort whispered. “But I don’t believe you. At the very least, your whore knows along with those friends of yours. If you call them friends, the way they’ve reacted to your disappearance is quite pathetic.”

“Those were just nightmares,” Harry responded softly. “You were just screwing with my mind,” he finished lamely.

“Was I, Potter?” Voldemort asked with a laugh. “How can you be so sure?”

How can I be sure? Harry asked himself. Some of those dreams had to be real, but they were too varied for them all to be true. The only question was which ones?

“What is the Prophecy?”

“I won’t tell you,” Harry responded calmly and without emotion.

“Don’t make me give the orders to attack that Mudblood’s house and capture your whore,” Voldemort threatened. Harry blanched, and Voldemort knew he had hit a nerve. “You don’t want me to ask her?”

“I want you to leave her out of this,” Harry spat at him. “This has nothing to do with her. This is just about you and me.”

“Really,” Voldemort mused out loud. “And how can you be so sure?”

Harry stared Voldemort in the eyes, not afraid that the monster could read his thoughts. Voldemort had been in and out of his mind. He had left no stone unturned in his search for the Prophecy. But it wasn’t there to find. Harry had hid it too well to be found, even by himself.

“You didn’t, Potter?” Voldemort screamed in fury. “You hid it from yourself! Crucio!” Harry fell flat on his face once more. This time he just screamed, unable to form intelligent words. His nerves were tearing apart. His cells were coming loose from one another. He was falling apart. His mind was breaking. Soon he’d be good only for the Closed Ward at St. Mungo’s. Nothing more than that. If Voldemort didn’t lift the curse soon...

But he did lift the curse. Harry turned over to empty his stomach of its contents. One more time under that curse and he would crack. Harry knew that. Voldemort knew that. The older Death Eaters knew that. Just once more and Harry’s mind would unravel.

“No one is to use the Cruciatus on the boy!” Voldemort commanded his servants. “I want to be the one to finally break his mind! It will not be pleasant if you push him over the edge. Now, Bella, Draco, and Wormtail come forward.” The four in question stepped out of the mass of Death Eaters and went to their knees. Crawling to kiss the hems of his robes, they each muttered, ‘Yes, my Lord.’

“I want you to go to the mudblood, Nymphadora Tonks’ house and raze it,” Voldemort instructed them. Harry felt the pit of his stomach drop out. “I want you to capture Ginevra Weasley, Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Tonks if they are there. Make sure Ginevra is there and you bring her back alive. If you fail me...” Voldemort let the

threat hang in the air for a few moments. "Go, all of you! And someone take Potter back to his cell."

Author's Note's: well, one more chapter and then there just might be a rescue... will Harry survive intact til then? That's the question...

Thanks for all the reviews, they are all appreciated!

Chapter Forty-Three: A Debt Repaid?

When you are with me
I'm free... I'm careless...
I believe...
Above all others we'll fly
This brings tears to my eyes.
My sacrifice...
I just want to say hello again.

Creed: My Sacrifice

Harry decided that he hated the command, "Take him to his cell," only seconds after Voldemort gave it. There were more than enough Death Eaters willing to do that. More than enough. Scarface was the one who got the chance to take him down the stairwells and through the corridors. Harry was sure Scarface enjoyed the pitiful groans that managed to escape through his lips each time he hit a wall or stair.

After a long torture period, Harry was left alone with only his thoughts to occupy him. Harry knew that his thoughts weren't safe for him anymore; that his mind was no longer his sanctuary. Voldemort was more than capable of interfering in there. More than capable of influencing it. Not to mention that Harry's own mind had a very active imagination and it wasn't against creating his own worst nightmares.

"Well, Potter," the Death Eater Harry called Healer said quietly. "Got yourself into a bit a trouble, did you?" Healer laughed as he took care of Harry's injuries, enjoying every bit of pain he caused Harry. The man left, and Harry was thankful for that small gift. Making sure a second Death Eater wasn't heading into the cell to continue were Scarface had finished, Harry took out the snitch Ginny had given him.

Harry played the mind numbing game with the snitch. He'd let it glide near him and then he caught it. After a few seconds of trapping the snitch in his fingers, Harry would then let it free. He would let it get farther and farther away before he would catch it once again. It might not be as exciting as Quidditch, but it passed the time and numbed his mind. Harry was grateful for both side effects.

Which of the visions he had seen were real and which were false? The nightmares where many months or years had passed could not be true, for Voldemort had confirmed the fact that only a week had passed. The dreams with Ron and Ginny captured could not be true, because Voldemort had just ordered their capture. Something told Harry that the Funeral vision had been a true one.

But, what of the rest? Surely Ginny, Ron, and Hermione didn't hate him. That couldn't be. Yet those dreams had felt so real. Maybe they did. Maybe they hated him. Or maybe they didn't believe his loyalties still lay with the side of light. They wouldn't think that, they just couldn't. Of all people, Ginny, Hermione, and Ron, knew exactly whom he fought for. They would never believe that he had switched sides. Or would they? He didn't know. He couldn't pick one way or the other. He was too confused to choose.

So he didn't. He let the snitch occupy his mind. Release, watch, catch. Release, watch, catch. That didn't require any thinking beyond the most basic. He could forget about everything else.

"Wake up, Potter," the snide voice of Malfoy said. "It's time to play."

"Go away, Malfoy," Harry snapped back at the teenager. "I was sleeping."

"Don't be rude," Malfoy sneered. "I'm in charge here, and you will listen to me."

"Am I the only lucky person, or have you finally captured Ginny?" Harry asked with an amount of cheek that he didn't really feel he had. Malfoy laughed.

"The Dark Lord will inform you when that brat visits," he responded. "Don't worry yourself over her, yet. She's not at the Mudblood's house. But the moment she arrives there..." Malfoy made a motion as if clasp something quickly. "We'll have her." Malfoy laughed hard as Harry spent the next hour being tortured. He was, despite himself, impressed with Draco's more creative style of torture. Instead of relying on the common dark art spells, Draco twisted the uses for normal spells into unusual and painful tortures.

“Twicodio!” Draco cast the spell that Neville had used months before to make Malfoy the amazing ferret’s ears twitch. Instead of innocent twitching, Harry’s ears twisted in a circle, causing them to tear and bleed painfully.

“Finite Incantatem!” Harry’s ears stopped trying to rip themselves off, though the bleeding continued. “Ardent!” Harry panicked as he felt his limbs start to burn. He could smell the burning flesh. He tried to put the flames out, but couldn’t.

“Why do you hate me so much?” Harry cried out as he felt his flesh char and burn away. Malfoy only laughed.

“Hate you, Potter? I don’t hate you,” he answered. “I despise you. I detest you. I want your girl. I want the loyalty of your friends. I don’t hate you. Never think that word describes what I feel for you exactly. It can’t begin to encompass those feelings.” The burning flames faded away and Harry realized that it had only been a trick on his mind. There were no burns, only the belief that he was burning.

“But why?” Harry asked again.

“Because,” Malfoy answered vaguely. “Wingardium Leviosa!” Harry felt his body rise into the air. Quickly, he found himself about twenty feet in the air and a fair distance from the stone floor. With a short flick of his wand, Draco let Harry fall to the ground with a sickening crunch. Harry let out a scream that shook the room very slightly.

“Potter,” Draco started contemptibly. “Perfect, famous, proud Potter brought down by a simple Wingardium Leviosa. Pathetic really.”

“Give me a wand, and we’ll see about that,” Harry managed to get out. Draco appeared to think of it for a few moments.

“If the Dark Lord would allow it, I’d give you your wand,” Malfoy answered. “But he won’t and he’d kill me if I gave it to you. Too bad, because this would be so much more enjoyable if it was a fairer fight.” Malfoy pointed the wand at Harry once more and whispered a spell. However, there was enough hate behind it to power the dark magic.

Harry felt each of his joints slowly start to pull apart. It was as if giants had a hold of each of his limbs and were walking away from him in different directions. His screams of agony echoed in the room. Two things happened in quick succession. He felt his sanity slip, just barely, and heard someone enter the room. Someone he knew. Someone he knew wasn't a Death Eater.

"What are you doing, Draco?" the angry voice of Sephra called out. "Release that spell immediately." Malfoy dropped the spell and turned to his cousin.

"Leave right now, Sephra, before I have to do something I'd rather not," Malfoy commanded her quietly. Sephra stood her ground, her feet slightly spread with her hands on hips, one touching the end of her wand.

"Please, before others realize that you're down here."

"What does it matter?" Sephra asked. "They'll lock me back up in my room anyway." Draco shook his head.

"No, they won't," he answered. "They'll lock you in a cell. If Dumbledore wasn't looking out for you, they would have already."

"Let Harry go," she said calmly, ignoring the threat. Harry shook his head, trying to clear it, because he couldn't understand what was going on.

"Leave," Malfoy all but pleaded.

"No," Sephra said defiantly.

"Very well," Malfoy mumbled. "Crucio!" Sephra fell to the ground, twitching and screaming. Harry felt his sanity slip a little more as he listened to her screams. After what seemed like eternities, but could only have been minutes, Malfoy removed the curse. "Stupefy!" Sephra fell to the ground. "She's too stubborn for her own good," Malfoy mumbled as he walked over to her. He levitated her body and locked it into the cell across from Harry's.

“Now I can’t have you remembering this,” Malfoy told Harry. With a quick memory charm, Harry had a smile on his face and couldn’t remember the odd exchange between the cousins.

Harry awoke, particularly groggy the next day. What was the day? It was Sunday. Voldemort had celebrated Harry’s two week visit with an extremely painful torture session yesterday after Malfoy had finished with him. It had been the longest two weeks in his entire life. He stretched his stiff muscles, hoping that they would allow him to crawl to the plate of moldy food. With enough coaxing, his muscles loosened for the short trip.

After forcing the food into his stomach, Harry crawled to the far wall. Leaning against it, he took out his snitch. Time passed slowly as the game allowed Harry to forget about everything. Release, watch, snatch. Release, watch, snatch. That’s all he did for hours.

He grew bored of the game, so Harry put the snitch away and searched his pockets for anything else in them that might serve as a distraction.

“Maybe I have a spare portkey in one of these pockets,” he told himself. In one pocket, he found a crunched up bit of parchment. He pulled it open and smiled as he saw a short note Ginny had written him back at the end of October.

“Hey, Harry,

Just thought I’d write you a quick note, ‘cause history is boring today, but what’s new about that? It’s nice going out with you! About time, if you ask me. The date last Saturday was great, the cliffs were beautiful. I’m sorry the night was ruined by your vision. I’m going to miss the Joneses.

Well, the bell just rung, so I need to leave, I’ll give this to you in the hallway,

Ginny”

Harry wasn’t sure why he had kept that note. They had written tons of notes since that October. Though most were in the Journal, there

were many floating around. But he had kept this one in his pocket since Ginny wrote it. Digging through his pockets once more, Harry found his dad's ring. He had never got around to asking Ginny about it. Well, he might as well put it on now.

Harry slipped it on his right thumb and nearly jumped when a charm swept over him. "What the hell was that?" Harry asked aloud to the empty room. As was expected, Harry received no answer from the room. A harsh and loud sound came from the lock and Harry prepared himself for whoever entered. It was Bellatrix.

Here we go again, Harry thought pessimistically as Bellatrix started her torture.

It seemed that Grimmauld Place got smaller every time Ginny visited the old, depressing house. It had never felt smaller than this summer, and it was stifling. The house seemed to thrive off of the sorrow and grief that radiated from those living there. Ginny had retreated into her room soon after breakfast. She couldn't stand being with others for extended periods of time. She was sitting on her bed at the moment, staring at the sulking feather ball that was Hedwig. Ginny stood and went to pet the bird.

"Where'd he get to, girl?" she asked softly. Hedwig hooted softly, the sound full of remorse; both ladies were missing their man greatly. Ginny turned and looked at her packed trunk. She was putting off unpacking, hoping that Tonks would be allowed to have Ginny move in with her. One long and seemingly unending week had passed, but Ginny was still in the old Black house.

"I need to unpack, don't I?" she asked the owl, giving Hedwig's wing one last stroke. Ginny moved and started unpacking her trunk. She put her clothes into the dresser, books on the bookshelves, and pictures on her desk. At the bottom of her trunk she found the Journal. Deciding to write Harry a letter, Ginny opened the beaten up book to the last few pages. Just enough for one last letter, she thought sadly. Reaching those few pages, Ginny was surprised to find that there was writing on a few of them already. When had Harry sent this back to her?

Hey Gin!

I bet you're wondering when I sent this back! Well, Hedwig delivered it while we were in Hogsmeade and she was supposed to hide it in your trunk, which I'm sure she did. I hope you find this long after school is out, while I'm stuck at the Dursleys. Can you believe that Dumbledore is actually letting me come home on the 26th? It's so unlike him, but maybe he's looking at me as an adult now, which is a nice change. I hope you survive in Grimmauld before I arrive to distract you... Actually, I hope your brothers don't hover over you when I get there, and we can find time to be alone. Please note that I am smiling wickedly.

I'm wondering if you remembered that Thursday was our eight month anniversary. Seems like an eternity, as if we've been dating our whole lives, but that isn't true. It's only been eight wonderful months. I can't wait until we celebrate our one year and the years after that!

I can't wait for today! I have so much planned for our date. We'll visit the twins, the Quidditch shop, and all sorts of other places. Just wait until after though. I'm going to treat you to a delicious meal prepared, not by me, but by Dobby, just for our anniversary! We'll have so much fun, and it'll be a double date with Ron and Hermione. But by the time you read this, today will be long gone. So I guess it's a bit pointless in telling you this. You will have already lived it firsthand. Oh well, I'm excited for it!

I'm glad this year is finally over! It was a long one, and a year I'm more than willing to put behind me. The best part of it was finally asking you out. But the rest... I'm ready to forget about a lot of it.

I don't think I ever got around to apologizing for my hospitalization. So here it is: I'm sorry! If it would have been up to me, I wouldn't have been hit four times by a bludger or once by your quaffle. I did enjoy the time I spent with you up there.

Just between you and me, how long do you think it will take Ron to ask Hermione to marry him? I say about a hundred years. What about you? I hope he doesn't wait too long, 'cause Hermione might give up on him. And we wouldn't want that.

Ron and the others just started to wake up, so I need to wrap this up. I hope today goes as well as I hope it will and I really hope that you get this after you get home.

Yours forever,

Harry

Ginny hadn't made it through the first paragraph without shedding a few tears, but by the end she was sobbing. Harry had been looking forward to that Saturday with so much optimism that it hurt reading this letter, knowing what had actually happened.

He must have woken up early to write the letter. Hopefully, it wasn't because of nightmares. It probably was because of some nightmare though. Ginny wasn't that naïve to think that Harry would have told her otherwise. He was too excited about their date to be worried about bad dreams.

She missed him. Merlin, she missed him. It was bad enough sending him to those horrible Muggles every summer, but this was a billion times worse. Ginny pulled Prongs tight to her side and cried into her pillow.

Sometime later, Ginny heard the door open. "What's the matter, Ginny?" Hermione's anxious voice asked from the doorway. Within seconds, Hermione was at her side and brushing her hair from her face. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Ginny got out. Ginny felt Hermione pull the Journal out of her grasp. "Give that back!" She tried to get the Journal back, but was exhausted from her long cry and sleepless nights. "Hermione, please," she nearly begged. Hermione didn't return the Journal, but instead was reading Harry's letter. Ginny buried her head into her pillow once more, letting the sobs control her once more.

"Come here, Ginny," Hermione told the younger girl. She had sat next to Ginny, so it was easy for Ginny to move into Hermione's comforting embrace. Ginny sat there, crying her heart out. All of her

worries were overwhelming her. Top on the list was how she would live without her dad, but a close second was what she would do if Harry didn't come back.

The tears finally passed, and Ginny moved away from Hermione. Ginny smiled at her thankfully and watched as Hermione crossed the room to sit on her own bed. Ginny quickly realized that Hermione still had the Journal. "Thanks," Ginny whispered gratefully. "But can I have that back?" Hermione looked at it thoughtfully and then handed it back to her. Ginny turned her back and cleared the book. Finishing with that, Ginny tossed it aside carelessly.

"What is that?" Hermione asked. Ginny knew that Hermione's natural curiosity would not let her stop asking. Resigning herself to that fact, Ginny thought about what she should and shouldn't tell Hermione.

"Harry and I write notes in it," Ginny finally told the older girl. "It was my gift to him for Christmas, but he came up with the idea."

"Really?" Hermione asked surprised. "He came up with that!" Ginny nodded. "What about people finding it?"

"Harry put a charm on it," Ginny replied. "It's kind of like the charm on the Marauder's Map."

"So, when do you think Ron's going to ask me to marry him?" Hermione asked with a smile. "And why is Harry asking that sort of question?"

"No reason that I know of," Ginny said, answering the second question first. "As for when, well, patience is a virtue." Hermione laughed at the joke. "Ron's bad at being assertive. But he will ask when he's ready. Trust me."

"Did you read the line where Harry said he wants to celebrate anniversaries in the coming years?" Hermione asked, bringing Ginny back to the present. "How serious are you guys?"

"No idea," Ginny answered sadly. "It all depends on Harry. I'm not going to push this. He'd react worse than Ron. So I'll just wait until he

figures out what he feels for me.” And it’s killing me! she finished to herself. “Why?”

“No reason,” Hermione replied, obviously distracted by her thoughts. “I think he likes you.”

“Of course he likes me, Hermione,” Ginny said reproachfully. “He wouldn’t be going out with me if he didn’t!”

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ginny and then looked at Hedwig. “She’s looking really lonely without Harry,” she observed out loud.

“She misses him,” Ginny said, not sure if she was talking in third person about herself or not. They both missed Harry. “She’ll be better when Harry... What the hell was that?” Ginny had felt some charm wash over her.

“What was what?” Hermione asked confused, curious, and cautious.

“Some charm,” Ginny answered, but distractedly. “I can sense him,” she whispered, not actually believing what she was saying. She knew what he was feeling, though not the full extent and what she did feel made her sick. She could tell that he wasn’t in London, but, instead, somewhere to the west.

“You can’t really feel him,” Hermione argued logically. “That’s impossible.”

“I tell you I can!” Ginny argued back. She sprinted down the stairs and into the library, looking for an adult that would listen to her. Remus, Tonks, or Thia would be good choices, because they wouldn’t call her insane or stupid. Lucky for her, all three were talking in the library. Unlucky for her, her older brothers, her mother, and a few Order members she only knew by sight were also in the room.

Everyone looked up at her, surprised by her hasty entrance and red eyes from crying. Ginny blushed but stood her ground. “Can I talk with you, Thia, Remus, and Tonks?”

“What took you so long to get down here?” Ron asked, as Hermione entered the room. “We sent Hermione up for you almost an hour ago.”

“Be quiet, Ron,” Hermione told him sternly. “Something happened while we were up there,” Hermione said, before trailing off and looking at Ginny. She felt a wave of nausea start to pass over her.

“I want to talk to Remus, Thia, and Tonks alone,” Ginny restated. The group of adults exchanged looks, but were soon distracted as Ginny started to dry-heave.

“Ginny, are you alright?” Mrs. Weasley asked, hurrying to her youngest child’s side. “What’s the matter?” Ginny shook her mum off, and made her way to a sofa. Wherever Harry was, he was in a huge amount of pain. Whatever was causing him that pain was making her feel horrible as well.

“Did you get around to telling her the good news?” Tonks asked Hermione, who immediately shook her head. “Dumbledore says that you, Ron, and Hermione are allowed to come to my house for a bit. He just wanted to put several precautions on the place first.” Ginny tried to smile in spite of the pain, but was only capable of a grimace.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Mrs. Weasley asked once again. When Ginny didn’t answer, Molly turned to Hermione. Ginny was thankful that Hermione kept her mouth shut. “What happened upstairs?” she asked the two suspiciously. Ginny fought the nausea until she was able to answer her mother’s question.

“I had been crying when Hermione entered,” Ginny started, looking at her shoes. “She started talking when I was finished, to get my mind off of it. We were talking about Hedwig, when this odd sensation settled over me. It felt like some type of charm.”

“What we’re you doing exactly?” Bill asked worriedly. Ginny could tell he was thinking of every evil charm he knew.

“We weren’t doing anything wrong,” Ginny said.

“What were the effects of this charm?” Remus asked thoughtfully. Thia and Tonks both caught onto the tone of voice, and they waited for him to elaborate.

Ginny looked at the room’s occupants. She felt like a fool. None of these people would understand. They would only mock her, particularly her brothers. Too late now, she thought.

“I can sense Harry,” she finally answered. Remus nodded understanding her completely, but her brothers all snickered as if on cue.

“About time,” Remus said, more to himself than to the group of people.

“About time what, brother mine?” Thia asked patiently.

“That he put his dad’s ring on,” Remus answered her. “Lily put a charm on them, once they started dating. It sends basic whereabouts and feelings to one another. Can you sense what direction he’s in?”

“Yeah, west,” Ginny answered, grateful that Remus knew what was going on. “And that’s why I dry-heaved. He isn’t doing very well,” she finished in a whisper. This quieted the room and everyone exchanged dark looks.

“How long until we rescue him?” Ron asked nervously. Ginny watched the adults traded yet another look, but Remus answered without thought.

“We have a spy looking for him,” Remus started. Mrs. Weasley hissed, but Ginny was relieved when Remus ignored her and continued. “They deserve to know, Molly. Harry is their friend after all. As soon as the spy gets back with information, we’re going to plan a rescue mission.”

“So you have no clue when?” Hermione asked making sure she had understood the man.

“Exactly,” Remus replied. “But at least we’re trying and you know that we are doing something.” Ginny nodded. There were times when she thought that the Order wasn’t doing anything.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Ginny asked hopefully. Remus shook his head.

“Just stay safe so that you’re here when Harry needs you,” Thia answered. Ginny nodded, but she was soon heaving again. “Should she be reacting to Harry’s pain like that, Remy?” Thia asked worried.

“Normally, no,” Remus replied, equally worried. “But if the pain is intense enough, then yes. He’s got to be in a really bad spot if she’s dry heaving.”

“Ginevra, take that ring off this instant!” her mother commanded. Ginny shook her head. There was no way she’d take off that ring. Even if he was in pain, she now knew that Harry was alive. He should be able to sense her if it was a two way connection.

“I don’t think she should, Molly,” Thia finally recommended. “Harry will be able to sense that Ginny is safe, if a little grief worn, and it might help keep his will to live strong.” After an intense stare down, Molly finally agreed.

“So when do we leave?” Ginny asked after she recovered.

“As soon as you’re packed,” Tonks said cheerfully. Ginny groaned. “What’s the matter with that?”

“I just unpacked this morning,” Ginny explained, and left the library with laughter following her.

Harry woke the next morning feeling horrible. Bellatrix had done a good job torturing him the day before, and he had spent almost 24 hours after that unconscious. Harry glanced over at the tray of food. There was no way he’d make it all the way to the door to eat that slop. Resting his head back against the far wall, Harry turned his attention to his dad’s ring.

What had that charm been? He didn't feel any different. He was still human, not something else. Harry searched through his mind, looking for any difference there. Nothing. It was still wide open to Voldemort though. There wasn't any difference.

Or was there? Very faintly, Harry felt a different presence in his mind. Checking to make sure Voldemort wasn't currently in his head, Harry explored that new presence. It felt like Ginny, but was it? It could be another mind game Voldemort was playing on him. Harry explored it a bit more and realized that he could sense her feelings. She was happy at the moment, but underlying that was a depression so uncanny in Ginny.

I have to get back to her! Harry said once again. He wasn't sure how often he'd thought that in the past few weeks, but he had never meant it more than at that moment. I just want to see her, touch her, tell her 'I love you!' That's it. I want her to know how important she is to me.

He could tell that she was somewhere north of where he was. Malfoy Manor was near Wiltshire, wasn't it? That was somewhere west of London, which means Ginny wasn't at Grimmauld anymore.

She's gone to Tonks' place! Harry thought. He felt the panic start to settle in his stomach. Tonks had better keep her safe there. Dumbledore must have put wards up to protect them. He wouldn't let Ginny go somewhere without protection. He would have her protected, wouldn't he? She wouldn't be captured. How could they let her? They had let him get captured. What could they do to protect her if they couldn't keep him safe?

Harry took a deep breath and thought it through. The Death Eaters wouldn't be able to capture her. Dumbledore would have made sure that Ginny was safe at Tonks'. There would be guards there and Dumbledore might have used the Fidelius Charm to protect it even more. Ginny was safe. Safer than he was, wasn't she? How safe could she be if Voldemort had Malfoy, Bellatrix, and Wormtail after her?

Not very safe. She was not safe at all.

“Go away, Malfoy,” Harry told the boy wearily later that same week. “I don’t have the energy to put up with you.” Malfoy sneered and sent a curse at Harry. He smiled vengefully as it hit the undefended boy.

“My recommendation to you, Potter,” Malfoy told him icily, “is not to anger me. I may have orders to hurt you as little as possible, but I just might forget.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, interested by that thought.

“It means,” Malfoy replied angrily, “that you be good and I’ll deliver the message that I’m supposed to give you.”

“Who is it from?” Harry asked before he could stop himself. Harry knew that he had crossed some line. Malfoy was livid, and he was going to take it out on him.

“Later.” With that, Malfoy started the torture session. It was horrible, if the circumstances were normal. However, circumstances were anything but normal. Harry had been tortured day in and day out for two and a half weeks and he felt like an expert at comparing different Death Eaters’ style, effectiveness, and form. This particular session was pathetic compared to others. The torturing stopped sooner than Harry expected.

“Now, I didn’t join to help you, is that clear?” Malfoy informed Harry forcefully. “I joined because it seemed like the best deal for me. But I’m ordered to tell you a few things, so I must.”

“Like what?” Harry interrupted.

“Don’t do that,” Malfoy said testily. “First, the Death Eaters tried to attack the residence of Nymphadora Tonks, but were unable due to the Fidelius Charm. That means the youngest Weasel is still safe.” Harry sighed. He hadn’t felt Ginny move, but he wasn’t exactly sure if the connection was to be trusted or not.

"Second, the Order now knows of your location and is devising a plan to rescue you," Malfoy continued in a monotone. Harry couldn't help but sigh out loud.

Freedom! Finally!

"Third, be ready on Thursday for anything. And don't forget Sephra. And finally, don't think anything has changed between us, Potter. I still hate you and would rather keep you as a guest in my home," he said with a wicked and evil smile. "However, I am forced to help you. But nothing changes." Malfoy started to leave the room.

"What day is it?" Harry asked quickly. Malfoy waved a hand at Harry, and opened the door. "What day is it, Malfoy?" Harry screamed at the boy, but all Malfoy did was smile at Harry and shut the door behind him.

Nothing has changed to be sure, Harry thought angrily. It wasn't his fault he had lost track of the days this week. Bella had been in several times, as was Scarface. He had spent many hours unconscious and other hours were lost in time spent tortured. All he knew was that it was morning, because the sun was shining in through his small window.

Harry felt lucid thought slowly return to his mind after Voldemort's curse. Whatever that spell had been, it had hurt like hell. Not quite as severe as the Cruciatus, but it got the job done splendidly. The past few days had past in a blur since Malfoy had visited. Harry had hidden that conversation as well as he had hidden the Prophecy. All he could remember was to expect something Thursday and not to forget Sephra. That was it. Remembering that he didn't know the exact day, but knowing that he needed to know, Harry asked.

"Today is Thursday," Voldemort replied sadistically. "You have been here 21 days, and your precious friends have done nothing to save you." The Death Eaters joined in with their master's laughter.

"Is Ginny here yet?" Harry asked, wondering if Ginny was safe. Though he hadn't felt the presence in his mind move closer, he wasn't sure if it could be trusted. If it was a fake, then Voldemort

might be using it as a decoy. "I was hoping to see her." This silenced their laughter.

"No," Voldemort answered shortly. The three charged to retrieve her tried to slink to the back of the crowd. "Don't go anywhere, you three," Voldemort called to them. "Why don't you tell them why she's not here?" The three exchanged looks and then looked at the ground. "Well?"

"Because we accidentally killed her," Malfoy finally answered, and if Harry had been thinking, he would have noticed the question mark added to the end of the sentence. Unfortunately, he wasn't thinking. His mind was processing the thought that Ginny was dead. She couldn't be! He could feel her. She was alive.

"Exactly," Voldemort finally said. "And what were your orders?" The three exchanged looks once again and then threw themselves at their master's feet. "What were your orders?" Voldemort asked again. Harry barely comprehended what he saw, for his mind was elsewhere.

Ginny was dead. She was dead! The only person he loved with his whole being was dead. Dead because she had loved him. Dead because he hadn't told Voldemort the Prophecy. Dead because... well, because he loved her.

Harry didn't notice when the three Death Eaters started screaming. He didn't notice when Healer stepped forward to take care of Harry's more recent injuries. He didn't even notice when a stray hex from Voldemort hit him. All he knew was that he good as killed Ginny. First her dad, and now her! I'm a plague to the Weasleys!

He was. If it wasn't for him, Voldemort wouldn't have attacked them back in September. If they weren't his adopted family they would still have the Burrow, and the twins wouldn't have spent weeks at St. Mungo's. If he hadn't been at Hogsmeade, Voldemort wouldn't have attacked. If Voldemort hadn't attacked, Mr. Weasley would be alive. And if Ginny hadn't been dating him, Ginny would still be alive. He was a plague.

All he wanted was to see her once. All he wanted was to touch her once more. But now... now, he would be lucky to make to the funeral. Ginny was gone. His Ginny was dead and wasn't coming back. Why Ginny? Harry cried to the heavens. Why does it always have to be me and my family?

"I have a surprise for you, Potter," Voldemort said, interrupting Harry's thoughts and pulling him into the present. "Turn around." Harry closed his eyes and turned. He didn't want to see this surprise. It had to be Ginny's body. It couldn't be anything else.

He opened his eyes and saw Lucius Malfoy standing in front of him. Harry looked around; looking for the body he had been so positive he'd see. He couldn't find it anywhere. "Lucius has been waiting for the chance to meet with you face to face since you humiliated him at the Department of Mysteries a year ago," Voldemort informed him. "I don't think you'll find his company boring." Lucius smiled evilly. Harry now knew that Draco had inherited his smile from his father.

"We're going to have some alone time, Potter," Lucius spat at Harry. "I owe you for the time I spent in Azkaban." Harry heard a few ribs crack as he hit the wall on the way down the corridor. Down a flight of stairs, Harry hitting every single stair on the way down. They walked along another hallway, Lucius sending Harry into the walls and doors the whole time. They then walked down a huge staircase that led into a huge entrance hall. There Lucius stopped, but Harry couldn't turn his head to see why.

"What are you doing in my house, traitor?" Lucius asked, furious beyond all doubt.

"Visiting an old friend," Harry heard the voice of his Potions Master say. "I see that you are not as hospitable since your multiple escapes from Azkaban."

Lucius growled at the man and then started firing curses at Snape. Harry painfully turned his body to watch the duel. Snape was extremely good at dueling. Ducking a purple curse, Snape fired a blue one at Lucius. The spell hit, and Lucius screamed in agony. Snape took that time to pass Harry a vial of some potion. Harry

looked Snape in the face for one second and then drank it. It was a strengthening brew and Harry felt his limbs grow stronger.

Lucius bared his teeth like a feral animal and circled Snape like prey. As for Snape, the man kept his cool and turned slowly, keeping himself between Harry and Lucius. "There once was a time when you'd have rather killed the boy as look at him," Lucius shouted at Snape. "Now, Dumbledore has you protecting him."

"It could be worse," Snape answered with a shrug. He deflected the Cruciatus Curse that came his way. The wayward spell hit the chandelier, and crystal fell to the ground in a beautiful glittering cascade. However, it cut into all three men's skin. "I could, for example, be on my hands and knees kissing the robe of an un-human monster." Lucius roared in anger and charged at Snape. This was what Snape had wanted, and quickly shot the killing curse at the unsuspecting man.

Lucius hit the ground hard, dead as a doornail. Harry looked at the body, completely stunned. The doors burst open and Order members flooded in, just as Death Eaters started streaming down the stairs. A battle ensued, and Harry was very close to being trampled several times. Trying to drag his body to the side of the hall, Harry felt strong arms grab him around the middle.

"Stop thrashing, you brat!" Wormtail hissed in his ears. "I've already killed that werewolf with this hand and I'll kill you as well, if you don't stop." Harry went limp. Remus was dead as well! Who else?

Harry tried to scream, but Wormtail clamped a hand over his mouth. Not that screaming would have helped; there was too much noise as it was. As they disappeared down yet another stairway, Harry saw Ron fighting with Malfoy and Hermione fighting with Nose Picker. No Ginny, anywhere. Wormtail struggled with the lock on the door and finally set Harry down. Harry, being Harry, tried to escape, but Wormtail froze him with a quick freezing charm.

Opening the door, Wormtail then turned to Harry. "Take this," the scumbag said, handing Harry his wand. "My debt is paid, as far as I'm concerned. I saved you from being trampled and I'm giving you this

back.” Wormtail pushed Harry into the cell roughly and then locked the door once again.

Harry felt the spell dissipate and, not caring how that happened, he welcomed the heat. Turning his head to look out the tiny window, Harry caught sight of the last person he thought he’d never see alive ever again.

“Ginny,” he breathed softly. “It can’t be you.”

Author's Notes: I just realized I messed that up in the last chapter... oh well...

So, is this the real Ginny or is Voldie messing with Harry's head some more?

Why in the world would I name this chapter "Debt Repaid" it's not like Wormtail did that much...

Thanks to you who reviewed... time to put up the next chapter!

Chapter Forty-Four: A Simple Avada Kedavra

so why do ya gotta stand there
looking like the answer now
it seems to me – you'd come around
i need you now.
do you think i can cope?
you figured me out – i'm lost and i'm hopeless
bleeding and broken – though i've never spoken
i come undone – in this mad season
Matchbox Twenty: Mad Season

"It can't be you," he repeated in disbelief.

"And why not, luv?" Ginny asked before launching herself at him. He groaned as she squeezed his recently broken bones. "I'm sorry," she said letting go.

"You're alive," Harry murmured. He tried to get his mind around the fact: Ginny was standing right before him, alive. It wasn't able to comprehend it.

"Yes, I am," Ginny told him, a tiny bit of worry slipping into her voice. "What's the matter?"

Harry sat up, wincing as his bones and muscles complained about the movement. He stared at her for a moment and then away, out the window. She couldn't be alive. She was dead. This was a trick. It had to be a sick, twisted joke from Him.

"You're not Ginny," he finally said, scrambling to his feet. Thankfully, only a few ribs were broken, though his muscles screamed in agony. "You're not Ginny." He turned from her before she could say anything, and limped painfully to the door. He glanced over his shoulder when he reached it, and saw that Ginny stood where she had been, stunned. Turning the door handle, Harry was surprised to find it unlocked.

Stumbling into the dark and dank corridor outside, Harry turned to hurry up the stairways. Up to the first landing he climbed. Ginny's

voice reached him faintly. Speeding up, Harry ignored the hallway off the landing and climbed to the entrance hall. It was chaos. Death Eaters were attacking Order members with the Dark Arts, many using the Unforgivables.

The Order members seemed to be holding their own, though every few minutes another fell to the killing curse. Harry couldn't see a single Auror that wasn't an Order member. Had the ministry left him to rot in a cell? Or had there not been enough time to get them involved? Harry drew his wand and saw the familiar walk of the Death Eater he had nicknamed Limper approach Remus. Without thinking, Harry shot a stunner at Limper. The man flew about ten feet into the air and fell with a loud thud.

Remus turned and saw Harry slip from the top of the stairs and into the fray. Harry put as much distance as he could between him and Remus. He wanted to show the Death Eaters that he was a force to be reckoned with, but he knew Remus would force him to leave before that could happen. Harry saw Nose Picker and made his way to the man. With a quick spell, the man was blinded and then fell stunned by the Order member. Harry took one second to process Ron's face as the Order member, before he melted into the battle.

Harry scanned the battle, looking for any Death Eaters he recognized. He saw Healer moments before he fired the Avada Kedavra at Dedalus Diggle. Dedalus fell, dead and Harry felt his temper rise. He'd always had a soft spot for that man. Harry took one step into Healer's line of sight. Healer wasn't wearing his mask, so Harry could see the sneer and look of glee cross the ugly man's face.

"I've been waiting for my chance to hurt you, Potter," Healer told him. "I was getting sick of healing you every hour."

"I never asked you to heal me," Harry spat at him. "Quine Flechum!" Five arrows shot from Harry's wand and sped towards him. Healer had a split second so contort his face into surprise before they pinned him to the wall behind him, two of the arrows actually piercing his skin.

Turning from him, Harry came face to face with Scarface. Harry's lips curled into a feral smile. They started dueling, Harry trying his hardest

not to let the fatigue that had been building up over-run his thought processes.

“Ingravesco!” Harry shouted at the Death Eater. They had been dueling for almost ten minutes and a crowd had slowly grown around them. The spell hit Scarface’s wand arm and caused Scarface to think it weighed a ton.

Scarface’s arm pulled him to the ground and Harry pointed his wand at the man. “What are you going to do to me, Potter?” Scarface asked, unperturbed by his predicament. “You gonna kill me?” Harry’s wand came to rest between Scarface’s eyes. Harry’s eyes connected with Scarface’s and the Death Eater gulped. “You are going to kill me, aren’t you?” Harry’s wand touched his forehead. “Just like you killed Lloyd?”

“Who?” Harry asked, not looking away from Scarface.

“Lloyd, the guy who always healed you,” he motioned with his left hand at the limp figure of Healer.

“I didn’t kill him,” Harry murmured silently.

“He bled to death, you killed him.”

“I did not,” Harry said defensively.

“Did to, and now you’re going to kill me,” Scarface assured him.

Harry looked at the man on his knees in front of him. Scarface deserved to die. He had spent countless hours torturing him this past week.

Go ahead and do it. You know you want to. Think of the countless hours of agony he put you through. Hours upon hours. He’s in front of you helpless. Just kill him. All you have to say is ‘Avada Kedavra’ and he’ll be dead, unable to hurt anyone ever again.

‘But I don’t want to,’ Harry replied to the voice in his head. ‘I don’t want to kill.’

But you already have. And you have caused the deaths of hundreds of others, including your own parents. Your Godfather. Your friends’ families. Countless Muggles. Their blood is already on your hands.

‘That wasn’t my fault,’ Harry defended himself. ‘I didn’t want any of them to die. It was all Him.’

It was all you. Kill him. He deserves it. None of those other people did. They were killed by men like him, if not by him as well. Kill him so that he never can kill again. So that he never has the chance to hurt someone else.

‘But I couldn’t,’ Harry repeated lamely.

So that he won’t kill. So that he will never be able to hurt you again. So that you won’t have to worry about him hurting your precious Ginny.

‘Ginny is dead,’ Harry said, his voice dead. ‘She can’t be hurt.’ The voice seemed to falter.

Then kill him for your Ginny. He might have been the one to have killed her.

‘No,’ Harry responded. ‘It was either Bellatrix, Malfoy, or Wormtail.’

Kill him.

‘Why?’ Harry asked.

He placed you under the Cruciatus for hours. He twisted your back. Repetitively. He mocked you. He tortured you. He hurt you. He nearly killed you. He deserves to die and you deserve to kill him. It’s your right.

‘But?’ Harry argued without conviction.

Just kill him.

‘Alright,’ Harry agreed. Harry started to pay attention to what was going on around him, and noticed that not much had changed. It almost seemed like no time had passed at all.

“I know you want revenge, Potter,” Scarface finished his statement. Harry noticed Ron, Hermione, Remus, Tonks, and Thia in the surrounding crowd and watching him in horror. He was going to kill him. Scarface deserved it. He wanted to kill this Death Eater.

“Avada Ke—” Harry started but was interrupted.

“Harry, don’t!”

Harry turned startled by the voice. There was the fake Ginny again. Raw pain shot across Harry’s face. “Get away. She’s dead. I’ll kill you next if you aren’t careful.” The fake Ginny paled and backed away for a moment. “Pretending to be my Ginny,” he mumbled. The fake heard him, and took a step forward.

“What do I have to do to prove that I’m the real Ginny?” she asked, sounding hurt.

“Nothing,” Harry told her. “She’s dead.”

“I’m not, luv,” she whispered to him.

“Don’t call me that!” Harry screamed at her. “Only she was allowed to!”

“I am allowed to, luv, ‘cause I’m the real Ginny,” she told him. Harry raised his wand when she said luv. Ron took a step forward, but Hermione held him back. The fake raised her hands. “What would only the real Ginny know that can prove that I’m her?”

“Lots,” Harry responded bitterly. “And if you were her, you’d know that. She was my lifeline, and now you’re mocking her.”

“Okay, let me rephrase that then,” she said, taking a step closer. “What can I tell you in front of all of these people that you don’t mind them knowing?” Only Ginny would think that he wouldn’t want every little secret reveled. No, anyone that knew him only a tiny bit would know how shy he was.

“Surprise me,” Harry said, turning his attention back to Scarface. “Ava—”

“The worst nightmare you’ve had this year was the Death Parade,” the fake said.

“He knows about that,” Harry told her, distractedly. “He probably knows more than Ginny did, seeing that he’s been in and out of my head for weeks now.”

“Okay, then it’ll have to be creative,” pseudo-Ginny murmured. “Just don’t kill him yet.”

“Be quick about it,” Harry snapped at her.

“Some things easier to write,” the fake told him confidently.

“He knows about that,” Harry replied.

“What about our hide out?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“You like it when I run my fingers through your hair.”

“Any idiot could see that if they saw the two of us together, but He knows that for a fact as well,” he finished tiredly, running his fingers through his hair.

“You asked me when you thought Ron would...”

“He’s ‘read’ that letter.”

"You gave me a stuffed animal that Hogsmeade trip, and I named him Prongs after your dad."

"He knows. I thought about how stupid I was leaving her alone, with only a stuffed animal to comfort her. I thought about that a lot," Harry said, trailing off, thinking about that once more.

The fake paused in thought. Harry was positive that she was a fake. She was picking all the easy secrets. Turning his attention from her, Harry faced Scarface once again. "I hate you."

"Well, obviously," Scarface retorted. "You are going to kill me."

"I gave you a snitch at the Hogsmeade trip," she started excitedly, "because you had told me you wanted one for Christmas. I thought Ron was getting you one, so I told you to wait. But he didn't, he didn't have enough gold, 'cause he spent too much on Hermione. I bought it with the extra gold my mum gave me for a chaser book that I've borrowed all year from Katie. You put it in your pocket before you 'left' for the loo. Does he know all of that?"

Harry looked at her surprised. He took the snitch out, without realizing what he was doing. He knew little of that and He didn't know about the snitch. Harry was positive of that. Looking down at his clenched fist, Harry opened it to see the small ball fly into the air. It hovered for a few seconds, before Harry snatched it again. "But she was dead."

"I'm not, luv," she told him, in a voice so loving that it made Harry look up at her. No one could fake that look.

"Gin?" How could this be? He was told she was dead. Malfoy had said that. He had been in trouble. He lied. Malfoy lied to hurt me! "How could I believe that that idiot would tell the truth?" Harry nearly yelled at the room.

"I don't know," Scarface said. He quickly stood and hooked an arm around Harry's throat. "But you just wasted enough time for your ingenious spell to wear off. Now I think I'll kill you."

"Your master will kill you," Harry choked out.

"I can say it was an accident," Scarface replied, confidently, as the Order members stood around useless.

"He'll probe your mind," Harry told him evenly.

"Then I'll torture you in front of your friends," the Death Eater decided sadistically. "The Cruciatus might be in order." Harry laughed, and a hint of insanity filtered into it.

"He'd have your hide for that," Harry responded. "Remember, he wants to be the one to break my mind. If you use that, it'll crack, trust me."

Scarface swore. "Then I'll have to be content with this. Vapulus!" The man dropped Harry, who fell gracefully to the ground, forced into a coma by the Dark curse.

Snape walked the last mile to the Malfoy Manor with the Order members and Aurors following him. Soon they would have to stop as the Fidelius Charm hid the last few hundred feet from them. However, Snape could see the Manor and a sneer plastered his face. Lucius was an absolute fool!

Draco had been able to tell Severus where Potter was kept, because Lucius had let Severus into the secret. Lucius was his own home's secret keeper. The fool hadn't redone the charm after Severus had been revealed as the spy among the Death Eaters. He was too bloody arrogant!

The plan was simple: kill the secret keeper and the secret is no longer safe. However, it was much easier said than done. The chances of finding Lucius alone were slim. The chances of finding Lucius at all were slim. Allowing Lucius to escape Azkaban had been a long shot, but a risk that had to be taken, and it would be taken by him, Severus Snape, the Slytherin everyone loved to hate. He was expendable to them. He was a pawn in this game of chess. They weren't attached to him, so they didn't care if he risked his life for Potter.

Severus turned the front door handle, having left the others far behind. Opening it cautiously, Severus slid into the open entrance hall. A smile crossed his face. Lady Luck was with him tonight.

“What are you doing in my house, traitor?” Lucius asked, furious beyond all doubt.

“Visiting an old friend,” Severus replied smoothly. Deciding to goad Lucius into doing something stupid, he continued, “I see that you are not as hospitable since your multiple escapes from Azkaban.”

Severus cleared his face of the smile that was threatening to cover it. Lucius took the bait and started to shoot dark curses at his old friend. Ducking the purple Vapulus curse, Severus shot an agony hex at Lucius. Having maneuvered Lucius towards the door and away from Potter, Snape was able to hand him a Strengthening Potion. The boy hesitated at first, but did take it.

“There once was a time when you’d have rather killed the boy as look at him,” Lucius shouted at him. “Now, Dumbledore has you protecting him.”

“It could be worse,” Snape answered with a shrug. He deflected the Cruciatus Curse that came his way with a simple mirror charm. The wayward spell hit the chandelier and crystal fell to the ground, cutting into their skin. Knowing what he needed to say to tip the scale, Severus prepared himself for what would happen soon. “I could, for example, be on my hands and knees kissing the robe of an un-human monster.”

Lucius lost all rational thought and charged. He killed her! Snape thought preparing himself for the killing curse. “Avada Kedavra!” His once best friend fell to the floor dead. Severus spared him one look and only one look, before Death Eaters started to storm down the stairs. Seconds later, Order members flooded in through the front door. Severus joined the fray, hoping that Miss Weasley could carry out her part of this mission.

Ginny watched as Harry painfully sat up. He looked worse than she had expected. His eyes were bloodshot and watery. He had several new scars covering his face and arms. He seemed to be stiff, unable

to move fluidly and she figured his ribs were broken from his reaction before.

“You’re not Ginny,” Harry said, panic filling his voice. Somehow, Harry managed to get to his feet and limped to the door. Ginny stood, stunned by what he had said, by what he was doing right now. He was walking away from her again!

She watched as he opened the amazingly unlocked door and walked out of the room. Away from her. He turned his back on her again! Five or so minutes passed and Ginny’s brain finally started to work again.

“Harry Potter, get you sorry little arse back here this instant!” she called after him, storming up the stairs. A voice responded across the hall from Harry’s cell, but it wasn’t Harry’s. In fact, it wasn’t even male. “Sephra?” Ginny called through the door.

“Yeah,” came her weak call.

“I’ll get you out, just give me a moment,” Ginny replied. She started to pick the lock to the door, amazed that these cells only had a simple Muggle lock on them. She had figured there would have been some spell on the doors in a pureblood fanatic’s house.

Remus had led the charge into Malfoy Manor, attacking the Death Eaters still on the stairs. He caught sight of Harry and was relieved to see that he was moving. Still alive then! Soon though Death Eaters swarmed past Harry and the boy was lost from sight. Remus hoped that the boy wouldn’t be trampled.

Seeing Bellatrix Lestrange firing spells at Ron, Remus decided to pay the woman a call. This slime bag was the reason he, Moony, was the last Marauder left from the good old days. They traded spells in rapid fashion. Ron turned his attention to another Death Eater and let Remus handle the better dueler. Remus was glad; Molly would never forgive him if something happened to her kids, young and old alike.

“Ardent!” Tonks called, firing the spell at Bellatrix’s back. The woman fell, trying to put out non-existent flames. Tonks cast an anti-

apparation spell on her and took her wand. Remus smiled at her and turned to the nearest Death Eater.

The Death Eater moved with a distinct limp, yet his dueling capabilities were top notch. Remus let the man maneuver him so that Remus' back was now toward the exit to the dungeons. Though he wanted to be able to see if Harry and Ginny came out, never mind the fact they would be wearing the Invisibility Cloak, he wanted to put a wall at his back with this opponent.

Because of that, Remus didn't see the person who casted the stunner until it passed him. It caused the Death Eater to fly almost ten feet into the battle. Remus turned around, wondering who had cast such a powerful spell without saying anything.

Harry!

Albus found himself letting go of a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. The Fidelius Charm fell away, leaving Malfoy Manor open to attack. Motioning to Remus, the werewolf led the charge into the front door. He made a second motion to Shackbolt, and the Aurors followed the old headmaster to the back entrance. If the house was visible, that meant that Severus was still alive. Albus had not wanted to send the man in alone, but there was no other way. Harry had to get out, and he had to get out now.

When Albus had been a young lad, the Malfoys had been a respectable family and good friends with the Dumbledores. But as his generation grew older, the family slipped into the Dark Arts. However, he had spent summers in this house, and knew several hidden entrances. Things always happen for a reason, the old man thought to himself, the irony not lost on him.

Weaving their way through the back gardens, Albus led them to a window lying near the ground. Opening it carefully, he slid into the kitchen. "Albus! My, you have grown!" a high squeaky voice greeted him.

"Hello, Dabby, it is good to see you again!" Dumbledore returned the greeting as the Aurors followed him in. "I've brought guests. You wouldn't mind fixing up some first aid, for I am afraid we will need it."

“Not at all, Professor,” a second house elf replied. “But, I must ask, have you heard of my son, Dobby?”

“Yes,” Albus answered as the last Auror entered. “But, alas, I do not have the time at the moment. Do not worry though, he is fine.” The house elves thanked him, and he led the group out into a hallway. Checking the room that Dumbledore knew belonged to Sephra, he was saddened to find it truly empty. “This way,” he mouthed to the others and led them towards the stairs. They met Ginny on her way up from the lower dungeons. “Is that Sephra, and where is Harry?” Dumbledore asked worried.

“Yes, and somewhere up there,” Ginny said motioning with her head up the stairs and towards the fight. “Something’s not right with him, sir,” Ginny told him. “Harry was convinced that I was dead.”

“Is that so?” Dumbledore said thoughtfully. Had Voldemort told Harry that lie when the attack on Nymphadora’s house had been a failure? A way to destroy Harry’s will even more? It was a possibility. Now, what should they do about Sephra? “Ginevra, take her to the kitchen. It’s at the end of the hall and on your left. There are two house elves there. Leave her in their care. Then get up to the fight as soon as you can. Only you will be able to prove to Harry that you are not dead. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Ginny replied and then made her way past the Aurors.

“It is time we join the fight,” Albus told the others. “May we meet at the end, safe and sound.” They repeated the farewell, a millennium old farewell. It was the traditional farewell of Aurors.

Dumbledore took the stairs two at a time, knowing that Voldemort lay ahead. At the moment, only he was in any shape to take on the monster that had once been a boy by the name of Tom. It always hurt Albus, thinking back to that eleven year old boy. Such potential... wasted.

“Dumbledore,” Voldemort hissed at him.

"Tom," Dumbledore greeted.

Hermione joined the crowd that had gathered around Harry and the Death Eater he was fighting with. All the other Death Eaters had either fled or were captured, unable to apparate away. There were also the dead Death Eaters, and Voldemort.

Hermione had seen Voldemort for the first time that night, and he terrified her. No wonder Harry had nightmares. The man was a nightmare. At the time, Dumbledore had been fighting with Voldemort, but they were nowhere to be found at the moment. So instead, everyone's attention was on Harry as he fought against the Death Eater.

"Ingravesco!" Harry shouted at the Death Eater. Hermione was amazed as the Death Eater's right side weighed the man down enough to stop the duel.

"What are you going to do to me, Potter?" the Death Eater taunted. "You gonna kill me?" Hermione gulped as Harry's wand came to rest between the man's eyes. Harry caught the man's sight, and he gulped as well. "You are going to kill me, aren't you?" No, Harry! Hermione shouted at her friend silently. Harry's wand touched his forehead. "Just like you killed Lloyd?"

"Who?" Harry asked. The Death Eater motioned with his weightless left hand. A Death Eater was pinned to the wall, two arrows piercing his skin. Yet, that's not what had killed the man.

"Lloyd, the guy who always healed you," the Death Eater informed the crowd and Harry.

"I didn't kill him," Harry murmured silently.

"He bled to death, you killed him," the man taunted. He did not, you dirty little liar! Hermione thought angrily. There isn't a puddle of blood!

"I did not," Harry said defensively.

"Did to, and now you're going to kill me," the Death Eater assured him.

Harry looked at the man on his knees in front of him. Hermione was sure that Harry was going to remove his wand from the Death Eaters forehead, but he didn't. His face took on a blank, almost crazy look that reminded Hermione a bit of Luna. Harry started to whisper to himself, not talking loud enough to be heard.

Oh no, Hermione thought to herself. His mind has slipped. He is a bit insane. She just didn't know how right she was.

"What are you up to, Tom?" Albus asked Voldemort in the library. Voldemort had slipped into a trance and was concentrating on something. Dumbledore extended his Legilimency probe and found that Voldemort was propelling his thoughts to someone. Someone not in the room.

"Get out of his mind!" Albus threatened Voldemort in a cold even tone. Dumbledore tapped into the conversation, but found that he couldn't interfere with it.

'...worry about him hurting your precious Ginny.'

Ginny is dead. She can't be hurt, Harry told Voldemort. Dumbledore could tell that that comment took Voldemort by surprise. The monster floundered before using that conviction to his advantage.

'Then kill him for your Ginny. He might have been the one to have killed her.'

No. It was either Bellatrix, Malfoy, or Wormtail.

Dumbledore stopped listening and tried to break the connection. Harry's weak rebuttal brought him back to hear the last thing he had thought he'd ever hear from Harry.

'Just kill him.'

Alright.

“What did you just do?” Albus asked, furious. He was in a cold rage now. No one had the right to interfere with another living creature’s thought process like that! No one!

“Just helped the boy along the way to greatness,” Voldemort responded with an infuriating smile. “I must be going, it really is a shame that I cannot stay to see the show, but, duty calls.” With that, Voldemort left by portkey.

“Coward,” Dumbledore mumbled. He hurried out of the library, down the corridor, turned right, ran another corridor, hurried down the back set of stairs. Once on the ground floor, Dumbledore stopped to regain his composure. He needed to be in control of himself before he entered that entrance hall.

Ron felt his jaw drop as Harry started the killing curse. “Avada Ke—”

“Harry, don’t!” Ron turned to see Ginny rushing from the dungeon stairs. Looking back at his best mate, Ron was surprised to see the hate and pain cross Harry’s face.

“Get away,” Harry told her in a voice that reminded Ron of Dementors for some strange reason. “She’s dead. I’ll kill you next if you aren’t careful.” Ron watched as a hurt look crossed her face. What the bloody hell was the matter with Harry? “Pretending to be my Ginny,” he mumbled.

Ginny heard and took a cautious step forward. “What do I have to do to prove that I’m the real Ginny?” she asked, sounding devastated by his lack of trust.

“Nothing,” Harry told her. “She’s dead.” Harry thought she was dead?

“I’m not, luv,” she whispered to him.

“Don’t call me that!” Harry screamed at her. His rage was at a boiling point, and Ron knew that he was close to cracking. “Only she was allowed to!”

"I am allowed to, luv, 'cause I'm the real Ginny," she pushed a little too hard. On the word luv, Harry had raised his wand, and Ron saw the words for the killing curse form on his lips. Ron took a step forward, but Hermione held him back. He glared at her. Didn't she know how close to death Ginny was at the moment?

Ron turned his attention back from Hermione and to the fighting pair. Ginny was asking a question, "... in front of all of these people that you don't mind them knowing?" Nothing, Ron answered her. Everyone knows that.

"Surprise me," Harry said indifferently. He turned back to the Death Eater. "Ava—"

"The worst nightmare you've had this year was the Death Parade," Ginny interrupted her.

"He knows about that," Harry told her, distractedly. How? Did he tell him? "He probably knows more than Ginny did, seeing that he's been in and out of my head for weeks now." Oh, well, that makes sense, I guess. No wonder he's a bit off his rocker.

"Okay, then it'll have to be creative," Ginny murmured. "Just don't kill him yet."

Ron started to think of everything he knew. What would convince Harry that Ginny was the real Ginny, if Voldemort had been in and out of his mind for two and a half weeks? Nothing about anything public. Harry would keep all but the most important secrets to himself. All Ron could think of was the Prophecy, but there was no way Ginny could say something about that in a room filled with Death Eaters.

"You gave me a stuffed animal that Hogsmeade trip and I named him Prongs after your dad." So that's why that dirty stag is her favorite stuffed animal.

"He knows. I thought about how stupid I was leaving her alone, with only a stuffed animal to comfort her. I thought about that a lot." Ron couldn't help but pity Harry at the moment. How Harry had made it this long with all that guilt built up inside him, Ron had no idea. And

that was on top of the torture and interrogations that he had to have had gone through.

Ginny paused trying to think of a good memory. Harry turned back to the Death Eater. "I hate you."

"Well, obviously," he retorted. "You are going to kill me."

"I gave you a snitch at the Hogsmeade trip," Ginny started excitedly, "because you had told me you wanted one for Christmas. I thought Ron was getting you one, so I told you to wait. But he didn't, he didn't have enough gold, 'cause he spent too much on Hermione. I bought it with the extra gold my mum gave me for a chaser book that I've borrowed all year from Katie. You put it in your pocket before you 'left' for the loo. Does he know all of that?"

Harry looked at her, his surprise evident on his face. He took out a snitch from a pocket and released it. Watching it fly for a few short seconds, Harry caught it. "But she was dead."

"I'm not, luv," she told him, in a voice so loving that it made Harry look at her. Her face shined with love.

"Gin?" he asked cautiously and confused. Ron watched as Harry thought it through and then his face contorted into anger. "How could I believe that that idiot would tell the truth?" Harry yelled at the room. Thia stopped Remus from dashing to Harry's rescue. The Death Eater Nott was serious about killing Harry. They owed it to James and Lily to get him out of here, alive. But how were they going to do that?

"I can say it was an accident," Nott replied. Thia grimaced as his wand pulled away from Harry for the killing curse. She exchanged a look with her brother. They were going to fail.

"He'll probe your mind," Harry told him evenly, as if it made the most sense in the world. It probably was, knowing what Harry must have gone through since he was captured.

"Then I'll torture you in front of your friends," Nott decided, a sadistic smile spreading across his face. Just let go of him, Thia baited the

man with her thoughts, and we'll see what his friends will do to you, you bastard! "The Cruciatus might be in order." Harry laughed, and Thia exchanged yet another look with Remus. Harry had lost his sanity. That could not be good.

"He'd have your hide for that," Harry responded. "Remember, he wants to be the one to break my mind. If you use that, it'll crack, trust me." Oh, Harry, what have they done to you? He spoke about his insanity as if it was normal, as if he had accepted it.

Nott swore. "Then I'll have to be content with this. Vapulus!"

Oh, shit! Thia screamed in her head. Harry's mind was not in any shape to deal with that curse. "You as good as killed him," Thia screamed at Nott. Seconds later, Nott left, apparating away. Thia ran to Harry, second only to Ginny.

"Is he alright?" Ginny asked Thia, hoping for the right answer. Thia didn't want to lie to the girl. Remus, Tonks, and she had promised each other that they would treat those four like adults.

"I have no idea," Thia answered her

"Move away from Harry," Dumbledore commanded everyone, stepping into the room. Thia took several steps back, along with everyone else, everyone, but Ginny. "Althea?"

"Yes, sir?" she said, stepping forward.

"Stabilize him so that we can move him to St. Mungo's," Dumbledore instructed her. "Ginevra?"

"Yes, sir?" she got out between her tears. Thia's heart broke at that look. Ginny had just lost a father. It wasn't fair for her to lose the love of her life.

"I need you to go get the house elves," he instructed her gently. "Tell them that I would like to speak with them."

“Must I?” she begged. “I’d rather stay with...”

“I know you would,” Dumbledore said, cutting her off. “But you know the house elves and where they are. Would you please get them?” Ginny nodded and Thia watched her take the flight of stairs to the dungeons.

“Is it safe to trust the house elves that belong to the Malfoys?” Remus asked the Headmaster.

“Yes, they’re old friends of mine,” Dumbledore replied, his face taking on a deep, reminiscent look. “With Lucius dead, they are master-less at the moment.

“Albus, he’s as ready as he’ll ever be,” Althea called to him. “It would be best if medi-witches moved him.”

“Let’s move him outside,” Albus instructed. “Thia, if you would get the medi-witches?”

“Yes, sir,” Thia said with a respectful nod of her head. She started almost running out. Turning around, she took one last look at Harry. Oh, Lily, I fear that we have failed you.

Harry found himself walking along a cliff, with an ocean at the bottom off to his right. Harry found the air refreshing and the smells invigorating, though he couldn’t remember why they were so extraordinary. It wasn’t as if he’d been inside for weeks on end. At least, he didn’t think he had been, but he couldn’t remember. He looked down at the water, as he walked, and appreciated the magnitude and beauty from the height.

Slowly though, he felt a sense of unease settle over him. Something wasn’t right. He couldn’t place it; the sun, the fresh air, the sounds, the wind, the animals... The animals, there were no animals. The only sound he heard was the faint sound of crashing waves hundreds of feet below. The grass was yellowed and the few trees were sickly and twisted.

This place was familiar, yet Harry couldn't place the location. He had never been anywhere like this before. Looking around, still walking, Harry tried to figure out why he remembered this place. Trying to think back into his past, Harry realized that he didn't know who he was, where he was from, how he got here, why he was here, or anything else from his life. His mind was a blank.

"What did you lose?" a voice said right next to his ear. Harry jumped, but kept moving forward. "Good, you remembered your lesson from last time."

"My last time, sir?" Harry asked the old man, who was now floating in front of him. "I don't remember a last time."

"Of course you don't," a voice Harry longed to hear told him. "Good to see you, kiddo."

"Sirius," Harry said under his breath. He knew the man's name was Sirius, but that was it. I must have liked the guy, Harry thought, because his heart was now filled with joy.

"That's right," Sirius nodded. "Can you remember Godric Gryffindor?" Sirius asked, pointing at the funny old man. The name seemed familiar.

"Gryffindor?" Harry said, tasting the name. "I'm a Gryffindor."

"You live in the Gryffindor common room," a female's voice corrected him.

Harry turned, and saw a very pretty woman walking next to a man, "You look just like me."

"That's because you're my son," the man answered, chuckling.

"Can you remember anything?" Godric asked, concerned. "Anything at all?"

Harry continued walking while he thought. His strange companions arranged themselves around him: Godric floating in front, Sirius to his

left, and his parents to his right. "Who am I?" he asked them hoping for a clue.

"You still don't remember?" Sirius blurted out rudely. Lily reached past Harry and slugged Sirius' shoulder. "That hurt," he whined while rubbing the sore spot. Harry found himself smiling. That seemed so familiar, but why?

"That's because your best female friends are both strong willed," Lily told him, as if she had read his mind. Friends? "Ginny and Hermione; Hermione has been your best friend since your first year. Ginny, well, she's special."

"You're telling me," Harry mumbled, memories of Ginny filtering through his mind.

"You remember?" Sirius asked, this time as politely as he could. Sirius looked at Lily with trepidation, but all she did was roll her eyes at her husband's best friend.

"Just her and you guys," Harry answered. "Wait, aren't you all dead?" They nodded. "Does that mean that I'm... dead?" Harry asked tentatively.

"Not quite," James informed him. "Very close to it. Much closer than you should be at least."

"He has to remember before we tell him anything else," Godric told the younger three, in a voice so serious, it surprised Harry.

"Last time I just had to jump over the edge and I'd be back in life," Harry mused allowed. "See you around, hopefully not too soon."

"Wait, Harry," Godric said, as Harry started to angle away from the edge. "You have to remember before you can jump!"

"I'm jumping," Harry replied evenly. "Good bye." Harry took a running leap and started falling towards the ocean. He couldn't remember anything beyond the fact that Ginny was alive and he was once again in the hospital. He had to wake up to see her. He looked down at the

water surface that was zooming at him. He had made it with room to spare.

Harry opened his eyes, but shut them quickly. The light was too bright for them. He lay in an unfamiliar bed and he couldn't remember how he had gotten there. He tried to listen to the sounds around him. However, his mind couldn't sort them into words. Finally growing bored, Harry fell back asleep.

The next time Harry opened his eyes, it was dark in his room. He couldn't see; someone had removed his glasses. Harry tried to call out, but his throat was too dry to allow it. Looking at the blurs that filled his vision, Harry couldn't pick out anything familiar. Where was he? How had he gotten where ever he was?

The last thing he could remember was watching Snape kill Lucius. A lot had happened after that, Harry was positive of that. What happened? He couldn't remember. Or maybe, his mind didn't want him to remember.

A hand came into focus and Harry flinched. It pulled back and then, slowly, it reached over to touch his forehead. It felt cool to the touch and Harry realized that he was extremely overheated. Harry heard a soft buzz and figured whoever it was had spoken.

The person put on his glasses and Harry looked at the Healer next to him. She was a young witch and was smiling down at him. She moved her lips and Harry heard that buzz again. She frowned and then wrote something down. Turning the pad so that he could read it, Harry read, 'You can't hear?'

Harry tried to move his hand to write a message back but she stopped him. 'Just shake your head yes or no.' Harry shook his head. Taking a clipboard from the end of his bed, she wrote something down. She put it back and took her pad and wrote, 'Well, Harry, you've been here about 6 days.' Harry nodded. 'You should sleep.' Harry nodded. 'Goodnight.' Harry nodded.

She reached over to remove his glasses. The world returned to its blurry condition, soundless, except for the distant hum. He watched one blob move away from his bed and out of the room. Harry found

himself feeling trapped. Alone, with nothing to look at and nothing to hear.

Sleep would be better than this. So Harry closed his eyes and slept. When he woke up the next time, his friends were sitting in his room. Ginny gave him a quick smile after placing his glasses on. Harry returned it, though he couldn't hear what she said very clearly. It was as if she was speaking from far off. She frowned and then leant nearer to his ear.

"Welcome back, luv," she said into his ear. Harry smiled and tried to speak, but his throat was even drier than last time. Ginny saw this and handed him a glass of water. Harry smiled his appreciation and took a drink.

"Thanks," he told her. Ron moved in next to Ginny and shook Harry's hand. "What's up with my ears?"

"They're not sure," Ginny replied, bending close to his ear. "They're trying to fix it. How are you feeling?"

"Alright," Harry replied, honestly for once. Ginny and Hermione gave him a dirty look. Not feeling up to explaining himself, Harry just shrugged. He looked past his three friends at the room beyond.

It looked like the room the twins had been in back during spring break. In the far corner, cauldrons rested unused. Chairs lined the wall near the door. There was only one bed in the room and one window. Remus, Tonks, and Thia sat in the chairs, talking quietly amongst themselves. Mrs. Weasley was standing near the window, looking old and depressed. Bill stood on the other side of the window, whispering to her. The twins were hanging out near the cauldrons, eyeing them conspiratorially.

"What are you up to?" Harry asked them, bringing the attention of the room to them.

"Nothing," George answered. "We were just talking."

"Oh," Harry remarked, feeling a bit let down. He had been sure that they were up to something. His face fell into a frown, and the room's occupants were surprised by the unguarded emotion on his face.

"Harry," Thia called to him. "When Professor Dumbledore comes, we need to talk about the past few weeks." Harry nodded, but he felt the bottom of his stomach fall out. I don't wanna! he cried out in his mind. Thia was taken aback by the look of hopelessness on Harry's face. "Harry," Thia said once more, getting his attention back, "how are your Occlumency shields?"

"The last I checked," Harry said sarcastically, "they were non-existent. But you never know. The last time I really checked was when?" Harry stopped and pretended to think about it. "Two weeks ago, so don't quote me on that."

"We'll need to rebuild them," Thia informed him.

"No need to," Harry replied. "He knows my mind better than me."

"How do you mean?" Dumbledore asked, stepping into the room.

"He's been in and out of my mind for weeks," Harry said, as if that was the most common thing in the world. "Nothing was safe in there."

"Nothing?" Dumbledore asked intrigued. "What of the Prophecy?"

"I can't remember that, so he couldn't find it," Harry said, getting bored by the subject. His matter-of-fact manner was unnerving his friends. It was so un-Harryish.

"Would you care to explain?" Dumbledore asked him, hoping to learn as much about Harry's stay before he clammed up.

"A few days after he took me, I realized that I couldn't protect my mind," Harry explained. "So I forgot it. Erased from my mind, you could say."

"Can you remember it now?" Dumbledore inquired.

"No," Harry said simply.

"Nothing?"

"Only that it was important not to let Him learn about it," Harry replied.
"Anything else?"

"Is there anyway you can tell me what happened?" Dumbledore asked delicately. Harry thought for a moment and then shook his head. "How did he break into your mind in the first place?"

"Between weakening my body and the wards everyday, I can't believe it took as long as it did," Harry mumbled in a quiet monotone. Thia exchanged a dark look with Remus, but Harry ignored them. "I think he said it was a Thursday... The first Thursday I was there. It wasn't a good week after that. What with the nightmares and visions. I hated those. Voldemort found the Death Parade so amusing. Said I should be a dark wizard. I had the right imagination. I hated that. I hated all of them." Harry was muttering to himself and the others exchanged looks. They were sure he didn't know he was still talking out loud.

"Luv," Ginny said interrupting him, "what are you talking about?"

"I'm not saying anything, Gin," Harry said, a blank and confused expression on his face.

"Oh," she said softly.

"Did he not know that you had forgotten the Prophecy?" Dumbledore asked after an awkward pause.

"No, not for a week," Harry said. "Look, I don't really feel like talking about that, so can we just let it rest? Or do you feel the need to keep digging up painful little nuggets that twist and cut at me?" Dumbledore's face fell and he frowned. Harry could tell that his words had cut deep and he was glad someone else was hurting.

"No, we don't need to talk about it," Dumbledore replied, the hurt evident in his voice. "Though, eventually we will." Harry nodded, though he'd do everything in his power not to talk about it.

Dumbledore left the room, looking old in Harry's eyes. What right did Dumbledore have to look old? Did he just spend three weeks in Malfoy Manor as a guest? No!

"Harry, are you alright?" Hermione asked cautiously. Harry looked at her, and she flinched; his eyes were windows into a tormented soul.

"I'm fine," he replied exasperated.

"No you're not, luv," Ginny told him sternly, but softly. "You are not. You thought I was dead, threatened to kill me, almost killed Nott, and then spent about a week unconscious. Do not tell me that you are alright."

Harry's mind couldn't work past the facts that he had threatened Ginny and almost killed Nott. He had almost killed someone? What had happened after Snape killed Lucius? He couldn't remember.

"I almost killed someone?" Harry asked, barely above a whisper. Ginny looked at him, worry etched into every feature of her face. She nodded. "I threatened to kill you?" She nodded again. Harry swallowed. "Why can't I remember?" he shouted. "I can't remember that! Yet I can remember everything else and that's just as bad! Why can't my bloody mind work right?"

"Harry, calm down!" Remus said, rushing to Harry's side. "Just take a deep breath, and we'll walk through the day you were rescued if you want." Harry started to calm his mind, remembering the exercises Thia had taught him at the start of the school year. "Better?"

"Yeah," Harry said, not certain if he was. "What happened after Snape killed Lucius?"

"You were taken to your cell," Ginny said, noticing the shiver that shook Harry at the mention of his cell. "You were frozen, so I thawed you out. You saw me, told me I was dead, and then ran from the cell."

It had been left unlocked. I called after, but you didn't come back. Then I rescued Sephra and helped the house elves heal her."

"I saw you coming out of the stairwell," Remus continued. "You had stunned the Death Eater I was fighting with. The stunner sent him across the room."

"Limper," Harry commented quietly to himself.

Ron ignored the comment and continued from where Remus had left off. Obviously they had talked this through. "Then you blinded and stunned the Death Eater I was fighting."

"Nose Picker," Harry mumbled, remembering the hours that man had spent torturing him. Nose Picker's torture sessions were second only to Bellatrix's in the hurt factor.

"What's that, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked, the first thing she had said all evening.

"I didn't know names, so I gave them all nicknames," Harry answered, remembering moments when he was writhing on the ground in agony while Nose Picker calmly picked his nose. "It just was easier, I could prepare. A bit, at least. Not much that I could do."

"Next, you faced a Death Eater by the name of Lloyd," Thia continued. "You pinned him to the wall with five arrows."

"Healer," Harry muttered. "And then Scarface." Harry paused as memories flooded his mind. "I killed Healer! I killed him! I didn't mean to. I just wanted him not to hurt anyone else. Not kill anyone else," he finished, his voice barely above a whisper.

Harry broke down, silently sobbing. He hadn't wanted to kill Healer. He didn't even want to hurt the man. He had just wanted Healer out of the so that he wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else. Harry hadn't wanted him dead. Sure, the man was a Death Eater, but he was still a man. He had killed him.

"He didn't die from loss of blood," Hermione cut in after a few seconds. "He died from the killing curse."

"I killed him," Harry echoed himself.

"You didn't kill him," Hermione scolded him.

"I killed a man," Harry muttered in disbelief.

"You didn't," Hermione nearly yelled. Ginny laid a comforting hand on Hermione's arm and shook her head. Ginny reached out with her other hand and tried to stroke Harry's hair. He flinched from her touch and looked at her panicked. Memories swam before him: being blinded by magic and getting hit by the unseen objects thrown at him.

"What's the matter?" Ginny asked concerned.

"Nothing," Harry said, breathlessly. "You just startled me."

"Harry, who told you I was dead?" Ginny asked him.

"Malfoy," Harry responded.

"Who told you that you killed Lloyd?" Ginny inquired.

"Scarface," Harry answered.

"What do Malfoy and Scarface have in common?"

"They're Death Eaters," Harry answered.

"Now who do you believe?" Ginny asked. "Us?" she said pointing to everyone in the room. "Or him?"

"You guys," Harry answered. "But then..." Could Mr. Weasley be alive? Voldemort had told Harry that Mr. Weasley was dead. Did he dare believe the lying scum bag?

"Yes?" Tonks asked, encouraging him to speak.

"Where's Mr. Weasley?" Harry asked. "He told me that Mr. Weasley was dead. But I bet that was a lie, to hurt me." Harry looked at the others hopefully. I guess not, he thought as he watched the others' reactions. Every Weasley looked at the ground, Mrs. Weasley holding back tears. The others had cleared their faces leaving them blank. "I guess He was telling the truth then."

Mrs. Weasley fled the room, Bill and the twins following. Harry looked at his three friends, and the guilt was plain on his face. Tonks, Remus, and Thia left after the others, leaving the four teens alone.

"I botched that up," Harry said angrily to them. He shouldn't have opened his mouth.

"Just kinda," Ron said with a faint smile.

"What's the date?" Harry asked. "Not the day though."

"It's the twenty-fourth," Ginny answered.

"The wedding is in four days," Harry replied, a faint smile on his face.

"Well, we've postponed it," Hermione told him delicately. "We wanted you there, so we had to make sure you'd be awake. It's the 3rd of July now."

"But," Harry started, but Ginny cut him off.

"No 'buts' about it. Remus wants you to be the best man, so you need to be there," she told him sternly.

"He knows about this?" Harry asked.

"No," Ron assured him. "I asked, in a circumventing way. Asked who was best man at your dad's wedding and then at Thia and Sirius' wedding. Then I asked who he would have picked back then and who he'd pick now. Both answers were Potters."

"Oh," Harry said, stifling a yawn.

"We'll be going, luv," she told him gently. "I'll see you soon." Harry nodded, and they left him to rest.

Author's Notes: Sooooo... Harry's free... finally... it's been a long 21 days. Oh why, oh why did he jump... er... never mind can't continue with that thought...

Hey, guess what's next! That's right, the wedding I promised for Tonks and Remus! Yet another reason why I couldn't kill off the twins! I had BIG PLANS for them and that wedding!

Thanks for reviewing and please come again for the second to last chapter of Lol!

Chapter Forty-Five: Here Comes the Bride

Love wandered inside
Stronger than you
Stronger than me
And now that it has begun
We cannot turn back
We can only turn into one.
Mariah Carey: Whenever You Call

“Harry Potter!” Tonks said, storming into the Hospital Ward of Hogwarts. Harry turned his head from the spot on the ceiling that he had been staring at for hours to look at the angry woman. Behind her, Harry noticed a peeved, but smiling Remus.

“Yes?” Harry asked, not sure what he possibly could have done to get Tonks angry. He had been stuck in St. Mungo’s for little over a week after they had rescued him, and then in the Hospital Wing for the past three days.

“What in the world made you think you’d get away with it?” Tonks asked him.

“Away with what?” Harry asked, completely confused.

“Operation Wedding,” Tonks replied simply.

“Oh,” Harry said, a smile creeping on his lips. “I’ll cancel it if you want,” he offered. Tonks opened her mouth to yell, but then shut it. She hadn’t been expecting that reply. “Who gave it away?”

“We walked into the library while Mrs. Weasley was cleaning the wedding robes for us,” Remus answered. “We guessed what they were for, and then we talked with the twins. They were very willing to throw you under the bus.”

“Oh,” Harry answered with a huge smile. “So, Tonks, do you want me to cancel it?”

"No," she answered quickly. "I mean," she continued hurriedly as Harry started to laugh at her, "you've gone to all that trouble. Is that why you guys were so panicky about us eloping?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "When you see the twins next, let them know that I want to see them." Tonks smiled and the couple left. Harry smiled up at the spot on the ceiling. They were so perfect for each other. Harry was jealous. Life with Ginny hadn't been good since he got back. Every time he saw her, he couldn't help but think of the minutes he had thought her dead and his threats on her life.

Something was different... with him. He had changed. Ginny was perfect for him, at least for the him of his past. But now, now Harry wasn't sure. He had threatened her. He had been moments away from casting the killing curse on her. She didn't deserve a guy like that. She deserved someone a billion times better than that.

Harry thought back to his torture. He didn't really like this line of thought, but what else did he have to do? Thoughts started to swim past his mind's eye. The look on Nose Picker's face as Harry writhed on the ground. The man always seemed bored, bored with causing him an immense amount of pain. Scarface passed by, reminding him of how close he was to killing the man and Ginny. Harry felt his body quake; he never wanted to get that close to killing a person again. But he would. He had to kill Voldemort.

"I don't want to kill," Harry told the spot on the ceiling. "I just want to live. I want forgiveness. For what I did to Ginny. For what I almost did to her. For what I did to Healer. I want the voices in my head to quiet and leave me alone. I want to forget about everything that just happened. I wish Remus hadn't told me the Prophecy."

Remus had, at Harry's urging, told him the Prophecy. He had been curious about it, and now he knew. All the memories of acceptance had been wiped out of his memory along with the Prophecy itself, so Harry was where he was last summer. Physically hurt, emotionally injured, mentally destroyed, and all he could think of was that damn Prophecy!

Harry sighed the sigh of an old man who had lived a long and hard life; and yet he wasn't even seventeen.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Ron whispered to Harry the morning of July third. "I mean, I understand that it's tradition and all, but seriously. We're too young for this." Harry rolled his eyes at Ron.

"You don't have to be a part of this," Harry answered, feeling the butterflies come in a wave. "You're not the best man."

"No, but somehow I'm here," Ron answered with a yawn. "And it's way too early for me to be up." Harry yawned as well. Ron was right, it was only 2:55, but tradition held that the best man wake the groom at 3 AM. Harry walked up to Remus' front door and turned it carefully. Creeping through the house they made it to Remus's room. Opening the door slowly and carefully, Harry snuck into the room.

Taking out a package filled with Weasley firecrackers, the two boys started to line them up around Remus' bed. Harry kept one eye on the sleeping werewolf. Lighting them with a quiet spell, Ron and Harry retreated to a far corner and plugged their ears.

The quiet of the night was disturbed by the loud explosions. Remus sat upright and swore, grabbing his wand. "What the bloody hell!" Ron and Harry started to laugh as Remus spotted them through the haze and sparks. "Get your lousy butt over here, Potter! This is something I'd expect from Sirius or your dad, but not you!"

Harry laughed as Remus continued to tell him off half-heartedly. Remus was in a great mood, it was his wedding day after all. "Seeing that Harry isn't legal yet," Ron said, teasing the almost, but not quite 17-year-old, "We aren't going to spend the wee hours of the day drinking, like tradition. My mum would have your hide before you even got both feet onto the beach."

"So what are we going to do?" Remus asked with a smile on his face.

"Butterbeers," Harry replied with a laugh. "I don't want Mrs. Weasley killing us, so this will work."

“Forget her,” Remus said. “Thia would get me first.” They spent the next few hours talking and drinking the butterbeer, after all, it wouldn’t be good if the Boy Who Lived was skinned alive the day of a wedding. “Where are we?” Remus asked, looking out at the ocean. They had taken a portkey to this location only moments before. The sun was in the sky swinging toward the horizon. They had just sped ahead several hours.

“Not sure,” Harry said with a shrug. “Thia was being a continuous snot about it, and wouldn’t tell us for months.” Harry looked for the pathway that he had been told about. Finding it, Harry led the groom and Ron toward the top of a small peninsula that stuck out into the water. Reaching the top, they saw a Wizarding village a little bigger than Hogsmeade. Harry smiled when he saw Thia waving at them.

“Where are we?” Remus asked Thia the second they reached her.

“Tewantin, Australia,” Thia answered. “We’re using Bryant’s private beach for the ceremony, tonight.”

“Bryant?” Harry asked, highly doubting it.

“His wife is Australian,” Thia answered with a shrug. “He bought it for her mainly, but he loves it down here. He started complaining about the cold and rain the first second he arrived in England.”

“His wife?” Harry asked, having a hard time picturing Bryant with a wife.

“Don’t say that to either of them,” Thia said with a huge smile, picking up on Harry’s train of thought. “Now, Tonks and company have taken over the guest house for Operation Bride. By the way, she loves the robe.”

“You guys get the upstairs to the real house to get ready,” Thia finished explaining. “Everything you need for this afternoon and evening is there. If you do need anything else, just let the oldest Bryant kid know what, give him some gold, and he’ll get whatever you need.” Harry nodded; it seemed that Remus had just realized why he was on the other side of the globe. “Remus,” Thia informed him, as

they stood outside the door to the house, "do not break her heart. I'll see you guys at six." Harry nodded and then between Ron and him they frog-marched him upstairs.

An hour later, Harry sat across from a nervous Remus. This was not just any nervous Remus, but one that had just gone through a nervous breakdown. Harry looked over at Shacklebolt and Tonks' cousin on her dad's side, Stevie. They shrugged, quite effectively saying that he had to deal with Remus, as the best man. They were only groom's men.

"Come again," Harry finally said, not really remembering everything Remus had babbled on about during his breakdown.

"Why I'm doing this?" Remus asked them, ignoring the question before. Harry had to feel bad for the older man. He was a wreck.

"Because you love Tonks and she loves you," Harry replied. As long as the questions were this easy, he'd be fine.

"But why? I'm ancient compared to her," Remus said, his voice sounding extremely confused.

"But you don't live that way," Harry told him. "You could if you wanted to. Just look at your life. But you don't, you live life as a Marauder. As a said Marauder, you have wooed the girl of your dreams and she is crazy enough to put up with your pranks for the rest of her life." He really wasn't the person to be giving advice about love to Remus. Ginny and he hadn't had one comfortable talk since he had been rescued.

"I'm insane," Remus stated simply.

"I know," Stevie said, stepping in to help. "You're marrying my cousin. Not any cousin, but Tonks. I actually feel bad for you," he finished with a smile. Remus' face fell, seeing that he took that the wrong way.

"I don't," Harry interjected, before any more damage could be done. After sending a quick glare at Stevie, Harry turned back to his friend. "You've got a great woman willing to marry you. You two are perfect for each other. And," Harry said with great ado, "if you don't go

through with this, Thia will dig up your body, and kill you again, seeing that Auror Tonks beat her to you. Once you're dead, Sirius and my dad will never let you live it down. You have the perfect lady and you, a Marauder, are too afraid to walk down that aisle and marry her." Remus took a deep, steady breath and smiled weakly at Harry.

"If you want, I'll go talk to Tonks," Harry offered. "Let her know that you'll be there and everything." Remus smiled thankfully, and Harry left the room hoping that there wouldn't be another meltdown like that. Walking the short distance to the guest house, Harry knocked on the door. Turning around as he waited, Harry stared out over the ocean. It was just as beautiful as he had always imagined it.

"Luv?" Ginny said, surprised to see him. Harry turned around, gulping as he did. There was Ginny, the most beautiful person in the world, and he had completely messed up his relationship with her. After a few minutes passed, with Harry staring at Ginny and Ginny waiting for Harry, Ginny finally lost her temper. "What do you want?"

"I have a... er... a message for Tonks," Harry stated, thrown off by her presence and anger. "Can I see her?" Ginny told him to wait outside and then she disappeared inside. Harry turned back around, kicking himself in the bum as he did so. He had officially screwed that up even more. What in the world was wrong with him? He had never had a problem talking to Ginny. But he had never threatened her before, or abandoned her before. He was on new ground with her, and he had no idea how to continue. Merlin, he wanted to keep the relationship. He wanted to keep it forever. He had finally realized, as Voldemort shifted through all the memories including Ginny, that he loved her.

Love. It was such a novel idea to him. It was something he had never thought he'd find. He remembered when he was a little kid, he'd watch parents with their kids at the park. The parents were so loving, kind, and generous to their children. Harry would spend afternoons watching one family and pretending to be one of them. It sounded so pathetic now, but wasn't that what he still did every time he visited the Weasleys? Pretend that he belonged with them?

Harry realized that too much time had passed since Ginny had left. Was Tonks having a meltdown as well? Harry knocked again, and an older woman who he didn't know opened the door this time. "Can I talk to Tonks? Remus sent a message for her," Harry told the woman.

"Well, if we could find her, then yes, you could," the woman replied. Harry noticed her accent and guessed that this might be Bryant's wife. The next second her words seeped in and Harry's jaw dropped.

"You can't find her?" Harry said, taken aback.

"No, we can't," she answered. "Come in, we're trying to figure out the last time anyone saw her." She led him into the living room and sat him down in the last open seat. The other ladies were already in the middle of their conversation.

"So we're all agreed that it was before the twins left?" Mrs. Weasley asked. There was a general nodding of heads. "Hello, Harry. How's Remus?"

"Well, when I left he was okay," Harry responded. "But before that, a nervous basket case. He sent me over to check up on Tonks."

"He sent the twins over less than forty-five minutes ago," Melissa said, stunned. "Is he so unsure about Tonks following through?"

"He didn't send the twins," Harry told them. "I've been with him since he got here, except for right now, and I haven't seen the twins here once."

"But they came with a message from him," Hermione said suspiciously. Harry shook his head.

"Nope, he didn't send them," Harry repeated again. "And they were the last people you saw with her?"

"They wouldn't," Thia let out dangerously. "Normally someone kidnaps the bride, to give the groom a heart attack. But we all decided that it wouldn't be a good thing for Remus. But obviously the twins thought his old heart could handle it."

Harry thought about everything he knew about the twins and their relationship with the couple. "I bet they did," Harry finally said. "What do I tell Remus? I'd rather not lie to him. Not on his wedding day."

"But we can't tell him the truth," a woman he didn't know said.

"I think we should," Thia finally said. "He'll probably freak, but in a better way than if we'd wait to tell him later. He'll just want to go search for the three and kill the twins. Better them than us." Harry nodded.

"That makes sense," Harry replied. "I'll go let him know." Thia nodded and Harry left. He walked across the yard, cursing the twins silently. He had to go tell Remus that Tonks was missing. Hopefully, the man would listen long enough to know that the twins had kidnapped her to be hilarious. He also hoped that Remus wouldn't kill the messenger, though Harry wouldn't blame him if he did.

"So?" Remus asked, stopping his pacing. He leaned against window sill and waited for Harry to answer. Harry took a deep breath and held up a hand to keep Remus quiet.

"You, um, know that the twins, er, like to joke around, right?" Harry asked the man. Remus nodded, a frown appearing on his face. "Well, would you find it funny if they 'kidnapped' her?" Remus shook his head. "Well, um, that's too bad, 'cause, um, that's what they did." Remus slumped into an armchair and rubbed at his face as if he was trying to iron out the wrinkles that had formed there.

"I thought Molly had told them expressly that they couldn't," Shacklebolt commented softly.

"When has that ever stopped the twins?" Remus asked the room. "We'll have to go along with this and find her. You sure she left with them, right?" Harry nodded. "She didn't realize that she wanted out and ran away?"

"No," Harry said patiently, more than willing to go through that all again to convince Remus she did actually love him. "She got herself kidnapped by two pranksters that she trusted. Where do we start?"

As if in answer to Harry's question, an owl he didn't recognize flew in through the open window. It landed on Remus' shoulder and hooted at him impatiently. Remus removed the note and the owl flew off. He read the letter and then handed it to Harry. Harry rolled his eyes; it was a scavenger hunt of sorts.

A house with a light. Go there for your next clue.

"They're horrible," Harry muttered. Harry passed it on to Shacklebolt, who passed it onto Stevie.

"That's just stupid," Stevie muttered, handing it back to Harry. "A lighthouse, of course." Harry nodded; no one ever said the twins were brilliant. Harry followed Remus down the stairs. Remus was about to bound right out of the house, when Harry stopped him. He had seen a boy of about 12 sitting on a chair swinging his legs.

"Are you the Bryant kid we're supposed to send on errands?" Harry asked him as politely as he could. The boy nodded and stood excitedly. "Name's Harry," Harry said, and proceeded to introduce the other guys.

"I'm Andrew," he said to them. "What can I get you?"

"Well, a bride actually," Remus told him, watching the boy's eyes pop out of his head.

"No," Harry reassured the boy. "We're being sent on a scavenger hunt to locate a friend. Seeing that we don't really know the place, it would be nice to have a guide."

"Sure," Andrew said, running to the door. "Where to?"

"The lighthouse," Remus said, following the boy out the door. They were running rather quickly, and Harry could tell that the boy had trained with his dad. They reached the old lighthouse and stared at it. Remus looked at it and cursed. "Where is that clue? It could be anywhere." Harry took out the note and looked at it again. There had

to be more of a clue than this. Turning it over, Harry saw an arrow pointing up.

“Let’s check the top,” Harry said, showing them what he found.

“You can’t get to the top without a broom,” Andrew informed them. “I can go get us brooms if you want.”

“That’s a good idea,” Harry agreed. “I’ll go with you, so that I can carry a few back as well.” Harry and Andrew took off at a sprint, Harry easily keeping up with the boy. Harry had been running through sword exercises throughout his stay with Voldemort. It had helped pass time and occupy his mind. Since he was released from the hospital wing earlier that week, he had started running again. He used the time to burn off his anger and bitterness, but it didn’t seem to help.

“Are you the boy my dad trains?” Andrew asked him as they ran. Harry nodded. “He likes you.”

“Really?” Harry asked, not believing the boy. Andrew nodded.

“He says you have talent,” Andrew said as they made it to a broom shed. “Grab one for you and the groom. I’ll take the other two.” They flew back to the lighthouse and gave the others a broom each. Remus sprinted to the top and started searching. The others did the same.

“When I get my hands on them—” Remus threatened five long minutes later. Harry had to agree, the twins would be lucky to escape alive.

“What happens if the arrow was pointing down and not up?” Shacklebolt asked. Harry took the note out and flipped it over. If the top was the same, then Shacklebolt was right.

Remus zoomed to the ground and started searching the base of the lighthouse. Harry dived, straight at the ground, feeling the adrenaline pump through his system. This was the first time he had been on a broom since the 27th of May. He was silently cursing himself for that

fact. It should have been the first thing he had done after getting out of the hospital wing. He pulled out at the last second and flew parallel to the ground with his feet mere centimeters from touching.

“Harry, come help!” Remus shouted at him and Harry sped back. There was no need to, though; Remus had found the note seconds after yelling. “Where mariners long gone had bad luck, there you will have good luck,” he read to them. They looked at Andrew, hoping he would understand it.

“What’s a mariner?” was all he said. Remus banged his head into the side of the lighthouse. “What’s the matter with him?”

“He’s just nervous that we won’t find Tonks,” Harry answered him. Turning to Remus, Harry addressed him. “We will find her, I’ll let you have first dibs on the twins, and then you can come back and get ready to marry her.” Harry turned back to Andrew. “A mariner is an old term for a sailor.”

“Oh, that’s easy then,” Andrew remarked excitedly as he mounted his broom. They flew off and about five minutes later they were next to a shipwreck. “This it?” Harry nodded it had to be. Stuck to the prow of the ship, the next clue was fluttering in the wind like a flag. Remus sprinted ahead and carefully removed it.

“Okay, we’ve lost our touch a bit on this one, but don’t say we didn’t warn you! He whips you into shape while you enjoy one of his cool treats. Ask him and he’ll give you the next clue. What the bloody hell!”

“Mr. Whippy’s!” Andrew cried happily, speeding back the way they had come. Harry was completely confused and he could tell the others were as well. Five minutes later, they were standing outside an ice cream shop. Harry pulled out his loose change and bought the boy an ice cream cone. Remus came back from talking to the genuine Mr. Whippy and then they headed off to the next site.

About an hour and a half and four stops later, they were searching the town square for the last clue. Harry had seen a tree that looked like an old hag of a woman if viewed at the right angle. He had been on a tiny island invisible from land. They had flown to the far end of the bay on the other side of the peninsula from the shipwreck.

Zooming back to the far end of the beach with the shipwreck, they had found an old abandoned hut. It reminded Harry of the hut he had stayed in when he had first met Hagrid.

“What was it again?” Remus asked Harry. Harry stood up from where he was searching the base of the water fountain and took the clue out of his pocket. “Where water spews in the middle of the town. It has to be here.”

“What if this is the obvious answer?” Stevie asked the group.

“It has to be,” Harry replied. “Think about the clue for the lighthouse.”

“Yeah, but what if it’s something more immature than a fountain?” Stevie asked pointedly. Harry followed his gaze and saw a woman’s lavatory.

“They wouldn’t,” Harry begged the others. Harry searched the square for the men’s lavatory. He didn’t find it.

“They would,” Remus told them, sitting on the edge of the fountain, defeated. The others joined him, staring at the entrance.

“I vote Harry goes in there,” Shacklebolt told Remus.

“I second that,” Stevie said quickly.

“Motion passed,” Shacklebolt finished with authority.

“I’m not going in there,” Harry told the others. “I might be best man, but no way.”

“Best man always gets the dirty jobs,” Shacklebolt said with a smile.

“If you make me go in there, Remus,” Harry told the older man, because Harry could see he was close to making him go, “it’ll be worse than anything He did to me while I was captured.” Remus’ face clouded over at the mention of Harry’s captured, so he relented.

They sat for another five minutes staring at the bathroom. They were so close, and yet so far away. It really was too bad that they were guys, shy guys, guys who didn't feel like getting shouted at by the women in there at the moment. If only one of the ladies were with us, Harry thought and then hit his forehead.

"I've got an idea, be right back," he told the others and then shot off on his borrowed broom. Harry landed on the porch of the Guest House and knocked on the door excitedly. Ginny opened the door and Harry only felt a bit put off by that. "I need your help," he told her. Her face lit up, so Harry continued. "The twins have been leading us on this scavenger hunt and well, they put the last clue in the girl's bathroom. At least that's what we think, but none of us wants to check, 'cause you know, it's the girl's bathroom. So would you come with me and check for Remus?" Harry waited as Ginny processed everything he had just said in one breath. In the end, he had to repeat it to her.

"Sure," Ginny said once she realized what they needed. "You have another broom." Harry shook his head.

"There aren't anymore," he told her, which was the truth. "Remus, Shackbolt, Stevie, and Andrew, Bryant's kid, all have one and I didn't grab one of theirs. You don't mind, do you?" Ginny looked at him and he saw her cheeks flush. She was angry.

She walked him away from the house and turned him to face her. "You've barely said a word to me since you woke up in the hospital. Actually you've said more to me in the last five minutes than the past ten days, which is sad, seeing that you're my boyfriend and I've been worried sick for you for the past month and a half." Ginny stopped and looked him, angry beyond words.

"We need to have this conversation," Harry told her. "But not now, and not today. Remus needs to find Tonks, and I don't want to ruin today's memory with anything that we might say to each other." And I don't want us to end, Harry added in his head. "We'll have this talk later, I promise you."

“Like you promised that you’d be back soon back in May?” Ginny spat back at him.

“Don’t use that against me, Gin,” Harry spat back. “I went by choice, but I didn’t stay by choice. You have no idea how Voldemort used you to torture me. If it wasn’t visions made up of you snogging Malfoy or you being tortured or you as a Death Eater or you married with kids or you hating me or you thinking that I switched sides, it was the real visions with you hurting, whether it was because I was still gone or you were stuck at Grimmauld or at your dad’s funeral. I couldn’t help you. I watched you suffer and I couldn’t do anything about it. It killed me to watch you like that, Gin.

“And then I threaten to kill you when I finally see you in the flesh. I was seconds away from saying the curse, Gin, seconds away. Do you know how that makes me feel? It makes me feel like shit. It makes me feel like the biggest loser in the world, because I finally get what I wanted the whole time I was captured and I almost killed you. It destroys me, Gin; that one thought eats away at me. Just give me some space. I almost killed the most important person in my life, and I can’t just get over that so easily.” He stopped, surprised by his rant. I didn’t want to say any of that. Not today at least. Harry looked back at Ginny and called himself several types of idiot. She was close to crying. Harry reached out a hand to comfort her, but pulled it back not sure if he should.

“Why don’t I ask someone else to check the bathroom?” Harry offered. “We’ll continue this later.” Ginny swore at him and ran off toward the water. Hermione and Thia walked out of the house toward him, watching Ginny’s retreating figure. Harry just stood stunned.

“What did you do?” Thia asked with a slight smile on her lips.

“It’s not funny this time, Thia,” Harry snapped. “I just started an argument that needs to be had, but not today. And, I don’t know. It’s just not funny.” Thia sobered quickly, watching the pain that radiated from the boy. Hermione started to walk after Ginny, but Harry called her back. “Tell her that I’m sorry. That we’ll finish that as soon as possible.” Hermione nodded and continued on her way.

“So, what are you doing here?” Thia asked Harry.

“I need you to take this broom and ride to the fountain and talk to your brother,” Harry told her, handing her the broom. “I need time to think before I join up with them again.” Thia nodded and flew off.

Harry started to walk toward the center of town. What did he just do? I made the problem a whole lot worse, he thought venomously to himself. “Gin means everything,” he started to mutter to himself. “The world. She deserves so much better.” She did! She deserved a guy who wouldn’t threaten her. Who would love her and know that he loved her. “I debated for months if I even like liked her. Now that I know that I love her, I can’t even live with myself when we’re in the same room together.” Harry continued to walk through town, mumbling under his breath. He, of course, didn’t notice that fact.

Harry finally made it back to the guys, and Remus shook his hand excitedly. “Why didn’t I think about that?” Remus asked him. Remus looked Harry over and started to worry for the boy. Thia had said something was up. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing we need to worry about today,” Harry said, and was thankful when Thia came out of the bathroom triumphantly. “Thia has the clue.”

Thia handed it to her brother, and then started to head back to the house. “Aren’t you coming with us?” Remus called to her.

“There isn’t an extra broom,” Thia explained. Stevie offered his broom to her.

“Take it,” he said. “I’ll go back and tell the others to expect Tonks soon, and I’ll get everything laid out for us so that you guys can get changed quickly.”

“You sure?” Remus asked.

“Yeah.” With that, Stevie started the trek to Bryant’s house. Thia took the broom and everyone turned to Remus who proceeded to read the clue out loud.

"A lone sentinel stands guard over the girl. King Kong has struck again. And that means what?" Remus turned to Andrew, who just shrugged.

"It's good one of us grew up Muggle then," Harry told the others. "King Kong is a giant size gorilla that normally captures a beautiful lady. It's an old movie, but a good one."

"A gorilla?" Andrew asked. Harry nodded. "Follow me." They mounted their brooms and took off after the boy. Harry had no idea what they would have done without Andrew along. About five minutes later, a vague form appeared in the distance. The closer they got, the more Harry realized that it looked like a gorilla.

"Is that it?" Harry shouted over to the boy. Andrew nodded. About five minutes later, they were close enough to see a person sitting on the top of the rock. They landed a few minutes after that. Remus ran over to Tonks and hugged her tightly. She wasn't bound by anything physical.

"They put an anti-apparation spell on me," Tonks finally got out through her laughter. "And they put my wand on that log down there." Harry looked at the log. The rock they were standing on was at least twenty feet high with no way down and no way up.

"When I get my hands on them," Remus threatened for the billionth time since this whole thing started.

"I get to help, right?" Tonks asked with a grin, an evil grin.

"Of course, my love," Remus replied. "Let's go get your wand..." Remus stopped as Harry dove at the wand. "What is he doing?"

"Acting like a stupid teenager who happens to be really good at Quidditch," Tonks said, before cheering Harry on.

Harry had decided that he needed to put his seeking skills to a simple test. Picking up that wand on the fly should be easy, if done right. Angling the broom a bit steeper, Harry pressed his body close to the

broom. The log was getting closer and Harry started to level the dive out. Just a bit more, only a few more seconds. Harry stuck out his hand, grabbed the wand, pointed the broom to the sky, and looped back to the rock.

"Show off," Remus muttered to him, as Harry presented Tonks her wand.

"I haven't flown in ages," Harry complained back at the man. "It was the perfect opportunity to dive. What did you expect? Me to let you just float down there and get it?" Remus nodded. "Never!" Remus and Thia laughed.

"For never meeting your dad, you sure have a lot of his tendencies," Thia remarked. "I can hear him say something very much like that."

"Let's just get back," Harry said both proud to be compared to his dad and a bit put off. Why couldn't he just be himself?

"What the heck am I thinking?" Remus asked Harry for the billionth time that night. They were taking the stairs down to a private beach. It wasn't a very large beach, and it was hidden from view by steep cliffs. The celebration would happen down there.

"Not sure," Harry replied with a laugh. "I can't read minds."

"That's not helping," Remus informed him.

"Well, you won't listen to the other answer I've been giving you all day, so what am I supposed to do?" Harry countered. "Tonks loves you. She's perfect for you. I'm not sure what you're thinking this exact moment, but I know you love her back. Stop complaining and remind me what I have to do."

"You don't do much for the first several hours," Remus started to tell him, glad for the distraction. "The ceremony is at midnight. Just make sure I'm there and you have the ring. After that, there's more celebrating and then I'm leaving with Tonks for our honeymoon. Thanks for that again. It's going to be a fun honeymoon." Harry brushed the thanks off and kept Remus moving forward.

The six hours leading up to midnight were spent celebrating the couple. There was a feast right away and many toasts to the couple. The tables were set up at the near end of the beach, close to the stairs. There was a particular seating arrangement, just as custom dictated. The groom and the groom's men sat at one table, closest to where the ceremony would take place. Across from their table, the bride sat with her attendants. The guests sat in scattered tables between them. Harry caught Remus staring in awe of Tonks and he didn't blame the man.

Tonks wore her Black looks and the pale green robe glistened in the firelight. She wore a darker green cloak to keep her warm and Harry couldn't see her face clearly. All part of the tradition, Harry knew that for a fact. The groom should be able to see, but still want more. Harry smiled; Remus was walking down that aisle for sure. Flowers were woven into the cloak's hood and he figured there must be some significance for their presence.

The feast was finished, and music started to play. The wizards and witches rose, some singing along with the old tunes. Remus frowned; he would dance every dance with eligible witches, whereas Tonks would dance every dance with eligible wizards.

"Don't worry, Remus," Harry told him. "The three of us, along with one or two trusted fellows, plan on monopolizing on her time." Remus smiled his thanks, he had obviously been worried that Tonks would realize that there were younger fish in the sea. Harry didn't know why he worried; Tonks looked just as disgruntled about Remus dancing with ladies other than her.

The hours before midnight passed quickly, yet slowly. Harry wished he knew these songs; it seemed that everyone else did. He danced every fifth dance with Tonks, with only a few problems. Remus found himself dancing with Thia, Melissa, and Trish (an Auror that Tonks worked with and the third bridesmaid) most of the time. Harry found himself forgetting about the horrors of the past month and a half and enjoying himself completely.

Harry stood next to Remus, waiting for Tonks to get up from her table. She was taking her good old time. It was her way to let Remus know that she didn't answer to his every beck and call. Harry had to smile.

Remus was in for hard, but good years ahead married to her. Tonks finally stood and her Maid of Honor, Thia, took the cloak off and left it on her chair. Harry watched Remus' jaw drop.

Tonks did indeed have her Black looks, no playing around today. In her braided hair were woven chains of beautiful flowers. A thin silver crown circled her head, and glittering charms hung from it. Harry remembered hearing tinkling when he danced with her, and he guessed that it was those charms making that sound. A young child ran up to Tonks and handed her a bouquet of flowers. Tonks kissed the boy's cheek and then started to walk toward Remus. She paused at the start of the chairs, and Ted Tonks stepped forward and took her arm. Harry smiled; Tonks and her dad were great together.

Harry heard Remus gulp. "You'll be fine, mate," Harry whispered to him as music started up. The guests filtered in behind Tonks, taking seats as they went. Three young girls ran ahead of Tonks and up to Remus. They each handed him a flower. Remus bent down and gave them each a kiss on a cheek. Harry grinned at the sight; the oldest girl couldn't be more than five.

Dumbledore made his way up after Tonks and Ted, followed by Thia, Melissa, and Trish. He was about halfway there when Tonks and her dad reached the end of the chairs. They waited for the old man to make his slow and solemn way forward. When he reached them, he looked at Ted and his daughter with eyes that had seen many weddings.

"Ted Tonks, do you wish to give away your daughter, Nymphadora Bobette Tonks," Harry saw her flinch at the use of both her first and middle name, "to Remus John Lupin?" Ted looked at his daughter with a sad smile and then at Remus with a calculating look.

"Yes, I do," he answered in a tone that said he truly did. He gave his daughter a last kiss before shaking hands with Remus. "Take care of my little girl," he told Remus, and Remus nodded.

Dumbledore took Tonks' and Remus's right hands and joined them. He conjured a vine of ivy and wrapped their entwined fingers with it.

Then, Dumbledore moved forward and turned to face the crowd. Thia led the other two women to stand opposite of Harry, Shackbolt, and Stevie. Harry thought that from the sky they must look a lot like a flock of geese flying in the “V” formation; Dumbledore at the head, Remus and Tonks starting the branch off, and Stevie and Trish at the end.

Dumbledore commenced the wedding and started to address the crowd. “Before we begin, is there anyone, besides the Weasley twins, who wishes to discontinue this wedding? Speak now, or forever hold your peace.” There was silence except for the waves crashing on the beach. It was high tide, so the water was only a few feet from the end of the chairs on that side. Sounds of insects added to the music of the place. This is where I want to get married, Harry promised himself.

Dumbledore continued with the service, and Harry listened with half of his attention. The magic of the place was overwhelming. Off to his right stood tall beach trees, their palm branches reaching out to bless the couple. Far to his left, the sliver of a moon reflected off the ocean water. All around them, torches were lit, giving the ceremony an unearthly feel. Harry felt midnight fast approach. The belief was that a couple should be pronounced man and wife at exactly midnight, so that they could start the new day with their new life together.

Remus turned to him, and Harry handed him the ring. “I, Remus John Lupin, present this ring as a pledge to my undying love for you, Nymphadora Bobette,” his face broke into a huge grin as she winced at the names, “Tonks. You’ve brightened my life when I thought it never would. I had given up on love. I had lost everyone that was important to me during the first war. I had let down my best friend’s son. I let down my other best friend, by believing that he would betray the other. I didn’t deserve love. I still don’t. But by some miracle, I have it. I found you. You brightened an old werewolf’s life in more ways than he can ever express, though I plan on trying every day we are married.” He slipped the ring onto Tonks’ finger.

Tonks turned toward Thia and retrieved the ring from her. “I,” she paused and looked at Dumbledore, pleading with him. He shook his head, and Harry had to smile. “I, Nymphadora Bobette Tonks present this ring as a pledge to my undying love for you, Remus John Lupin.

Your love for life is intoxicating. The stories you have to tell put my antics to shame. Your laughter is wonderful, and your smile lights up the room. I love to make you laugh and see that smile. I brighten an old werewolf's life? I beg to differ. You brighten a young motherless woman's life. I can't believe I found you so soon. I can believe though, that our love will endure the ages. Until death do us part and then beyond, Remus. I've got a hold on your heart, even after we die." Remus laughed as she slipped the ring onto his finger.

There was a strong feeling of magic in the air. Waves crashed hard onto the beach. A wind whipped at their robes and made the charms on Tonks' crown twinkle prettily. Harry was reminded of how strong a form of magic that love was. It had enabled him to survive the killing curse all those long years ago. Now it was going to bind these two people together into one. Harry smiled; Remus deserved this completely and Tonks would make sure that there wasn't a dull moment.

Dumbledore smiled at the young couple, young at least compared to him. "May you flourish together as you begin your new life together on this great adventure. I now pronounce you man and wife." Dumbledore looked at a stunned Remus. "You can now kiss your bride." Which Remus did without any hesitation.

"My eyes!" George cried out, standing up and pretended to claw at them.

"I'm blind!" Fred screamed. Remus broke the kiss with Tonks and glared at his two bosses. They sat back down and remained quiet as Remus kissed her again.

Dumbledore then looked up at the crowd and addressed them. "It is my extreme honor to present to you Mr. Remus J. Lupin and his wonderful new wife, N. B. Lupin." Harry laughed as Tonks thanked the old man for the abbreviations. They walked back down the aisle, removing the ivy so that they could hold hands easier.

The next several hours before dawn were spent in dancing, feasting, toasting, laughing, and singing. Harry watched the happy couple, thankful that Operation Wedding had turned out so wonderfully.

Yet as the morning started to approach, Harry's gaze traveled more and more to a certain red-head girl: Ginny Weasley. He sighed. He had officially messed things up with her. She was perfect, yet he wasn't worthy. What would he do? When would he have a chance to make amends? Would he be able to fix it? Harry hoped so. She started to walk toward him and Harry felt his heart quicken.

"Can I have this dance?" Ginny asked him. He nodded and Harry realized that it was Ginny's favorite slow song. He felt his body tense and he tried to relax. This is Ginny after all! he scolded himself. Harry let Ginny wrap her arms around his waist and pull him close to her. He wrapped his arms around her and looked down to where her head rested on his chest. The dance continued and Harry laid his head on her, breathing in the scent of her hair. How could he mess this up?

The next two songs were slow songs and Harry danced them both with Ginny. As the third song winded down, Harry whispered into her hair, "I'm sorry, Gin."

"I know you are, luv," she replied, not moving her head to look at him. "But we still need to talk."

"Can you forgive me?" he asked her, almost pleading.

"Of course," Ginny replied. "I just need to know what I'm forgiving you for to begin with." Harry nodded and swayed to the music with her. He hadn't felt so grounded in a long time.

About an hour later the sun was rising and the call went up for the groom and bride. They were nowhere to be found.

"Time to turn it in then," Dumbledore informed everyone. "It seems our lucky couple has taken it upon themselves to leave. So it's time for us to leave as well." Harry smiled, knowing that it was normal for the groom and bride to leave the 'after party' without telling anyone. It had been a good day, considering everything.

Author's Notes: Well, there, they're finally married! I spent several hours (all day one weekend) reading up on wedding customs around the world. Thia is dressed in green because it is the color of new life,

fertility, and ... something else that I don't remember... the charm crown is I think a Norwegin (sp?) custom... several cultures had people kidnapping the bride... one had the groom being woken up early... of course many customs has the father give away the daughter, though if Tonks had a brother, I might have gone with that tradition instead... Ivy is used because it is a plant that is nearly impossible to kill, a symbol of undying love... um.. the flowers in Tonks' hair are heather and lavender... I think it's a Celtic tradition, but I don't remember, flowers are used in almost every culture though...

I want to thank Chris for coming up with the location of this Wizard Villiage... he used to go on holidays as a little kid there and Mr. Whippy is in there just for him... All the clues, but the lighthouse and the shipwreck are my own imaginations... oh, and the secret beach is a truly secret beach that he and his cousin found once... What else? Nothing that I can remember...

Ok, there's gonna be a bit of a delay with the next chapter... I didn't write a scene in it that I had not (at the time of the writing of the chapter) realized needed to be in there... I was planning on putting it in the next fic, but Harry's standing right in front of the collage and I had to write his reaction to it... We'll see if I can't get to beta it tonight... even if she's busy... we'll see... (up date: she just said she'll look at it... the delay might not be that long, after all...)

Well, i envy all you people that live to the east of me... at least up to the international date line... You'll get HBP long before me... lucky... enjoy it and don't spoil it... I'm already thinking about block my aussie betas/friends 'cause they're being a bit annoying about it... Chris even said he might give me a spoiler... i hope he doesn't 'cause I might never talk to him again... (note that there wasn't an ns there, Chris, i'm deadly serious)

Until the next chatper!

loci

Chapter Forty- Six: The Beginning of the End

Let me fall
If I must fall.
Though the Phoenix may
Or may not rise.
Josh Groban

If I fall along the way,
Pick me up and brush me off.
And when my smile gets old and faded,
wait around, I'll smile again.
Matchbox Twenty: Bent

"I'm not going there," Harry told Dumbledore Saturday. Harry had slept most of Saturday away after the wedding, but now he was back in England, watching the sun set a second time that day. The time difference had messed with his head completely. Harry was fighting with Dumbledore in the old man's office, just like last year. The only difference was he wasn't alone this time. Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Thia, Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye Moody, and McGonagall were all in the office as well. "There is no way I'm going back there!" Harry declared once more.

"We agreed last spring that you would head to your relatives," Dumbledore reminded him.

"And that was before we factored in the fact that I would be spending 20 some odd days at Malfoy Manor," Harry countered. "Had I known that I'd be spending the start of June there instead of with the Dursleys, I would not have agreed to go."

"You need to spend a few weeks there to keep the blood protection active," Dumbledore argued with him, losing his cool. Harry shook his head.

"I'm not going," he replied in a deathly serious tone.

"You must," Dumbledore insisted. Harry casually looked over the others and realized that they were all stunned. They hadn't expected this argument at all.

"I mustn't do anything," Harry replied. "I'm sick of doing what everyone says. I've spent weeks doing whatever the Death Eaters wanted. None of it was good or pleasant, for me at least. I see no reason to return to the Dursleys. If I'm going to be kept at Hogwarts and Grimmauld then what's the point?"

"The point is, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said, all serious now, "that on both places there is a special ward for you and only you. The power in that ward is based on if you live with blood relatives or not. You will not be entirely safe here or in Grimmauld without it."

"Instead though, I put a target on whichever building I'm staying in that says, 'Here I am, come and get me'?" Harry asked. "I'm safe, but everyone else isn't. He knows my weaknesses, Professor. He knows that all He needs to do is capture just one of my friends and I'll be back in Malfoy Manor. I'll do it all again. Better me than them," Harry told the old wizard. Everyone was stunned by the feeling in his voice. He would do it again. The power was emanating from him once more, brighter than ever before and this only cemented their belief in him. "I can't go back, Professor," Harry begged and the light seemed to dim. "I have no defenses."

"You will be protected," Moody interjected.

"Not those protections," Harry told him. "My Occlumency shields are down. My equilibrium is still off kilter from... everything. I can't face them. Not like this."

Thia looked at the young man and felt her heart break. He was right, he couldn't face them. "Professor, a private word if I may?" Dumbledore nodded and stood to leave the room.

"No," Harry stated simply. "If it concerns me, it stays here." Thia looked at the Headmaster questioningly. He nodded for her to continue.

"Sir, you've had me watch Harry since you dropped him off at the Dursley's," she appealed to him. "I've watched him grow, putting up with shit that even I wouldn't be able to take. Normally, he's more than able to handle it. But this isn't normal, sir. He needs to build up his defenses, or Vernon will eat him alive once he realizes Harry's vulnerable. I've told you what they're like, and you can't seriously want to send him back."

Harry stared at Thia. She had watched him; guarded him throughout his life. A memory surfaced and he examined it. He was painting the shed last summer. He had sensed someone watching so he had looked. There was a face watching from the neighbors' yard. That face, it was Thia's.

"I saw you, last summer," Harry said aloud. Thia nodded. "I knew I recognized you from somewhere."

"That's beside the point," Dumbledore told them. "I know it'll be hard, and I do not believe you'll have to stay more than two weeks. You need to go, and that's the final word." Harry glared at the old man.

"You owe me big time," Harry finally said, relenting. Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "No more than two weeks, do you promise that?"

"I do."

"Fine, I'll go," Harry said, acting like a very unhappy teenager, which he was.

"Now onto the other topic of business," Dumbledore said, changing the subject. "We need to talk about your captivity—"

"Bloody hell, no!" Harry shouted at the man. "We'll talk about that when I say so, no sooner and no later." Harry gave the old man a piercing gaze, and Dumbledore could plainly see the boy's soul. It was tormented. It was hurting. Though Dumbledore knew that it would do Harry good to open up, he couldn't force it. Not with Harry's soul so close to crumbling, and his sanity close to being unfixable. "Do you understand?"

"I do," Dumbledore told him, surprising everyone in the room. Dumbledore looked over at Fawkes, and the bird started to sing.

Harry smiled as the first note hung in the air, but soon he was frowning. The normal sense of peace from the music was lacking. Harry could tell that it was there, but it was just out of his grasp. He looked at the bird and he thought he saw it shed a tear. Is he crying for me? Harry asked himself. For the loss of my innocence? The phoenix nodded his head in time with his song, but Harry couldn't help but think it was an answer to his thoughts as well.

Harry stood before the song was even half done. He couldn't listen any longer, knowing what kind of peace he was missing out on. He looked at the Headmaster, and then away. That look had held thousands of words that Harry didn't know where there. Harry took one more panicked look at Fawkes and then rushed out of the office away from that song. However, that song haunted his thoughts. He couldn't escape it. No matter how much distance Harry put between him and that phoenix, the song still haunted him. He would never be able to escape it.

Dumbledore put his head into his hands and thought hard about that look. Harry was scared; that was obvious enough. The fact that he had grown up too soon was transmitted to the old man clearly. He was severely broken. He was panicking. He was confused. He was angry. He was lost. He knew what he was missing, and it was destroying him.

Dumbledore rubbed his hands across his forehead, trying to think clearly. Where had he gone wrong? The beginning, was the only answer he had to his question.

Harry stood in the Entrance Hall the next morning. His face was drawn and wan looking. He had lost weight while he had been at Malfoy Manor, and he hadn't gained it back. He still had some of his muscle, but he would need to train before it was back to what it should be. He was going back to the Dursleys' today and he wasn't thrilled with that thought. Over all, the picture Harry made was one of depression, insanity, and dejection.

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He stepped over to the new addition to the Entrance Hall. A huge collage hung on the wall opposite the doors outside. Harry smiled slightly, remembering watching them hang it. It was one of the true visions he had had at Malfoy Manor. He started reading the bits of paper, amazed by what his D.A. members had written. His eyes found those written by his three greatest friends.

On a lime green piece of parchment and in Ron's untidy scrawl was written: I want to celebrate 'cause I still have my brothers and sister. 'Cause I've got the best friends in the world. 'Cause I'm still alive, even after every single Potions class I've taken. Over a bit, Harry found Ron's handwriting again. "I'm thankful that my sis found the greatest guy in the world to date (no offence, Dean) even if I was a bit of a prick about it at the start... Sorry 'bout that... I just didn't want to lose two of the three most important people to me..." Harry smiled; Ron had grown up quite a bit since then. He'd have to give Ron a hard time about this. He was much more than a "bit" of a prick.

Next to it was a white slip of paper with Hermione meticulously neat hand writing. "I'm glad Ron and Harry locked me in a bathroom with a troll. Okay, not really, but I am thankful they came back, not only because I'd be dead, but also because it was the start of the greatest friendship. Thanks for teaching me that breaking a few rules once and a while is not a bad thing." Harry laughed at the memory. She was very right about that, just like normal. Written below it, in Ron's handwriting was this note: I'm holding you to that, 'Mione. When Harry and I want to sneak out of the common room and head to the kitchens, you can't say anything anymore. This caused Harry to laugh even harder. Ron was right as well. Hermione should not have left that in writing for all the school to read.

Near Ron's first one was another slip of purple parchment with Hermione's handwriting. "I want to celebrate... because I want to. What good is fighting a war for peace if there is nothing worth fighting for to begin with? We could cower and hide and let Voldemort win. Or we could LIVE and have fun and beat Voldemort." Hermione had nailed that. He, Harry, had been saying that for months.

Harry searched for the handwriting that belonged to Ginny. In the lower right corner he found it. Written on a white slip in emerald green ink were these words: I am thankful for still having my mom and all my brothers: Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred, George, and Ron. I don't know what I'd do without them." She had included Percy. Did that mean the brother had been forgiven? Harry needed to ask Ginny that when he found her. He searched for the second one, knowing that it had to be somewhere.

He finally found it, smack dab in the middle. It was short. It was simple, but to Harry it spoke volumes. "I want to celebrate, because Harry is still alive, even if he got himself captured, the git." What had he been thinking? There had to have been another way to save her, Ron, and Hermione. The smile that had been on his lips, left them. Instead a frown appeared and Harry's musings turned dark.

All those who had been present while he argued with Dumbledore left the Great Hall and walked toward him, smiling a good morning at him; Harry tried to smile back. His eyes found Ginny's, and he silently begged for her to forgive him. After he had left Dumbledore's office, Harry had left the castle and just ran. He ran until he didn't recognize his surroundings. By the time he made it back to the common room, Ginny had fallen asleep on the couch waiting up for him. Harry had spent a few hours watching her, before he headed up to bed. He hadn't had the conversation he had promised her yet. It looked like it would be another two weeks before they talked. Not that that's what he wanted; he wanted to have it now, before he left.

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Moody took out an old comb and instructed everyone to grab hold of it. Harry couldn't believe everyone was heading to the Dursleys'. They would not be happy. He felt the normal pull of the portkey and then he found himself toward the bottom of a heap. Once they got everyone sorted, Harry realized that they were in the play park near Privet Drive. He started walking toward the house without even thinking. His feet had walked the way so often that they needed no instructions to get there. The others fell in behind him.

Harry realized that it was Monday, which meant that Uncle Vernon was at work. That was probably for the best. He would freak out if he knew that twelve witches and wizards were heading toward his home at that very moment.

Harry caught sight of the familiar house and started to head toward it. As they neared it, McGonagall, Moody, Thia, and Shackbolt surged to the front. Harry let them pass him, and then he hopped the low wall and reached the door first. They had just walked around the wall and through the gate by the time Harry had knocked. He was going to be in charge of this.

Aunt Petunia opened the door and stifled a scream. She looked past him and saw the others walking to her door. "You should let them in, before they make a scene," Harry warned her. She nodded and moved out of the way so that Harry and the others could enter. Harry led them into the living room.

"Where have you been?" Petunia asked rudely as soon as the door leading outside was shut.

"I've been occupied," Harry answered shortly. Petunia took a good look at the boy and she had to repress a shudder. "I need a room to stay for a few weeks."

"Your room is always opened to you," Petunia informed him. She realized that the room was filled with wizards and witches and paled considerably.

"Let's get this straight," Harry started to tell her. "I don't want to be here, and you don't want me here. But here I am. We'll live with each other. I've been a houseguest in a lot worse conditions, so don't even try to make me submit. I left on rather good terms with you, and I want to keep it that way. Is that alright with you?" Harry finished politely. Petunia nodded, taken by surprise. It seemed that the whole room was.

"As for your husband," Thia continued from where Harry left, "he needs to keep his hands to himself and leave his shouting behind. I'll be watching, as I've been watching you all his life." Petunia nodded but opened her mouth to say something. "I know you don't really have control over it, but do try this year."

Petunia turned to her nephew and smiled. Harry was taken aback. She had never smiled at him like that. "Who are these people?" she asked politely. "I've seen most of them before."

Harry turned to the group and introduced them all. Finally, he was just down to the three most important people in the room. "That's Ron, my best mate. That's Hermione, my other best mate and his girlfriend. And the last person is Ginny, my, er," Harry blushed, realizing that he was talking to his aunt. "She's my girlfriend. That's everyone."

"It's nice to meet you all," Petunia replied. "Professor Dumbledore and I had several long chats this year and, well, Harry, I hope you'll forgive me." Harry nodded, though she knew as well as he did that it was only a promise to think about it. "I will do my best to control Vernon and Dudley. Dudley has been out every day, sometimes for a few in a row, so he shouldn't be much of a problem. Vernon will be at work almost every day for the next few weeks. They have a huge contract in the works and he's been working over time."

"I'm sure you'll take care of Harry for us," Mrs. Weasley responded, carefully keeping her anger toward the woman under control.

"I will," Petunia replied. "Not to rush you out the door, but I have several ladies coming over in half an hour, and it would be best if you weren't here." Moody and Thia nodded in understanding.

"Thank you for letting us in," Thia responded. "I'll be checking in. Harry, hopefully we can work on your Occlumency when I'm here." Harry nodded.

"It was a pleasure meeting you all." Petunia turned toward Mrs. Weasley. "It was your husband that shrunk my son's tongue down, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Harry said quickly, hoping that Petunia didn't make the same mistake he had made a week or so ago.

"Tell him hello from me and give him my best wishes," Petunia offered politely. She was stunned when Molly flew out the door and down the road, with McGonagall, Bill, Fred, and George following close behind. Harry mouthed that he would explain it later.

"Bye, guys," Harry said awkwardly to his friends. He was very conscious of the eyes that were watching them. Thia seemed to notice this and ushered Shackbolt and Moody out of the house. Petunia took the hint and left as well; though Harry wouldn't put it past her to peek around the corner. Once a gossip, always a gossip. "Sorry 'bout the way I've been. I just need some space."

"That's okay, Harry," Hermione said, giving him a hug. "We'll wait until you're ready; though, our patience might wear thin after a while." Harry smiled at her and Ron moved forward. He shook Harry's hand in a goodbye.

"Be careful and don't let those Muggles push you around," he told him quietly. "I don't want to be reading about you on the front page of any paper, you understand?" Harry nodded. Ron gave him a quick hug and the two left. Harry turned toward Ginny.

"I meant that you're my girlfriend, Gin," Harry reassured her. Ginny nodded. "I wish we could have talked. When I get back to Hogwarts, I

promise that you'll have the first full day I'm there. Unless you can come visit me here, then we'll talk then." She nodded, still unconvinced. "Ginny, please, don't give up on me. I need you."

He crossed the distance between them and embraced her. She didn't fight; on the contrary, she hugged him back. He tilted her head up and kissed her. It was their first kiss since the snog session in the mountain cave back in May. It was everything Harry remembered and more. They broke apart, and Ginny smiled at him. "Remember that, Gin." Ginny nodded and left with a soft and gentle smile on her face.

"Are the freaks gone?" Petunia asked rudely. Harry nodded, he had been sure his aunt's good mood could hardly last. "How dare you bring them to my house?"

"I didn't have a choice in the matter," Harry replied. "I'm going to my room, so leave me alone." Harry grabbed his trunk and heaved it upstairs to the smallest bedroom in the house.

Harry was bored. It was only Sunday afternoon and he was bored already. "What should I do, girl?" he asked Hedwig. She hooted softly and looked at his trunk. "Yeah, I should unpack." So he did.

At the bottom of his trunk he found two things that he had hardly thought about or seen since May: the Journal and the gift from his mum. Picking up the Journal, Harry used the password to read the last letter.

Dear Harry,

It's been several weeks since you said goodbye to me. I miss you. I moved to Tonks' yesterday. It's better than Grimmauld, yet, nothing is quite the same without you here with us. Everyone's so worried about you. Every Order member is bent on finding you. Remus looks like he's aged a decade with the worry for you. So does Dumbledore. I guess I do too.

Tonks is great. We've talked a lot about nothing in particular and Hermione and I have only been here a day. Ron's around here too,

but he spends his time with Tonks' dad, Ted. They've hit it off great! But, underneath it all, we're all worried for you.

I've realized just how much you mean to me. I've known for a while that life wouldn't be nearly as good without you there somewhere in it, but I now know that you're more important than that. Harry, I miss you! I need...

There was a break, but the letter continued on.

Sorry 'bout that, but Tonks' place was attacked. We're all fine and the Death Eaters didn't get past the wards. I've got to go to sleep now.

Night,
Ginny

Harry!

They know where you are! I don't have a lot of time, because somehow Remus convinced Mum to let Ron, Hermione, and me go to the Order meeting where we're going to plan your escape. I can't wait! I hope they let us help in the rescue!

With all my love,
Ginny

Dearest Harry,

I write this as you lay on a bed in St. Mungo's. I'm not sure what just happened, but I've decided that this letter will not be about that. It'll be about... well, whatever I think of while I'm sitting here.

First, Bill and Melissa got engaged! Can you believe that? Mum has perked up a bit with that news. We don't know when the wedding will be, but it sounds like Operation Wedding won't be over as soon as we thought. I'm so excited! And Melissa wants a huge family. That means I'll have lots of nieces and nephews! That should be a lot of fun too, though that's several years away.

I'm glad you put your dad's ring on. It surprised me at first, but I was glad to know you were alright and that you were truly alive. I knew, and yet, I couldn't be sure. Once you put that ring on, I knew that you were alive. It was a very nice thought.

Ron's had a few fights with Charlie about you and me. Charlie muttered once that this was what he was afraid of, me hurting 'cause you weren't there. He also said he was losing hope that you'd come back to us alive. Ron laid into him for that. One would think he had been all for us since the start. I guess he's grown up a bit. Well, actually a lot since then. We all have. I'm glad that Ron and you had that fight when you did. Had you been in the middle of the fight now, there's no way Ron would be able to live with himself. He's a better friend 'cause of it, and a better brother.

I miss you utterly and completely, Luv, even if you are laying in the bed right in front of me. It just isn't the same as when you're up and moving. The healers say that you'll wake up soon, so I won't be far from your side, unless they make me. They will probably make me leave, but I'll be back as soon as I'm allowed back. I promise that!

I can't wait to talk to you. We'll only talk about what you want to talk about and I really can't wait to tell you about the Harpies! They've won... Oops, never mind. I want to tell you in person, so that I can see your face. They did win their first game as the English team for the World Cup. They play Bulgaria next week, and Krum is trash talking like you wouldn't believe. I think he's still sore about his and Hermione's break up.

Well, like I said, the Healer is kicking me out now. I'll be back. I promise.

Love,
Ginny

Harry couldn't help but smile sadly. Ginny had been so optimistic. Or at least, she was trying to be. He had really screwed that up. He noticed a hurriedly scrawled note at the very bottom of the page.

Dear Harry,

Dumbledore is making you go to the Dursleys' tomorrow. I don't think we'll have time to talk so I want to get this written so that Hedwig can deliver it to your trunk.

I've been thinking about what you said Friday afternoon. I know you didn't want to say most of that, but I'm glad you did. I thought I should let you know that I knew when you were watching. When I didn't want to live at Grimmauld, I could tell you were there, trying to reach me. At my dad's funeral... I wouldn't have been able to get through it without your presence. I knew you were there at those times and it comforted me. More than you could ever know. Thank you, Luv.

I'm not sure what's going on, but I still love you. Please know that no matter what happens I will always love you, Harry James Potter. You're hurting, it's so clear to me. Without any of your normal shields, it's painfully obvious.

I'm going to try my hardest to convince Dumbledore to let me visit. We need to have that chat you promised me, and I need to see you to make sure that you're alright. I hope we'll do a bit more than just talk. Because you can't see my face, I thought you should know that I'm grinning at you in the way Ron hates so much.

Until I see you next, stay safe and sound.

I love you, Harry. I love you more than I can tell you.

Yours forever and ever and ever and ever etc. etc.,
Ginny

Harry stared at that letter. She still loved him! She wanted to visit to talk and do a bit more than that. Harry wasn't going to stop that. He wanted to talk to her as well. He closed the book, clearing the pages. He looked over at the gift from his mum. Harry picked it up and broke the tape that sealed it. Pulling back the brown paper, Harry saw that it contained a shoe box. He slid the top off the box and stared at the contents. There were a few Journal-like books, loads of pictures, and some small items. Harry picked up the photos and noticed that some

were still, Muggle shots. Not all were Muggle though, many were Wizard moving shots.

Harry smiled at a picture of the Marauders with Thia, Sam, and his mum. They were waving at the camera and smiling like crazy. Harry stared at his mum and dad. They were standing next to each other, but they weren't holding hands. Harry remembered that they didn't start going out until the September of their seventh year. If they were friendly with each other, then that must mean that it was the summer before that year.

There was a picture taken of Lily and her family. Her parents were smiling, but Petunia was glaring. Lily had an arm wrapped around the unhappy girl, and Harry thought that that might have been the reason for Petunia's frown.

Harry spent most of that afternoon looking through the photos. He felt a tear or two escape, but he didn't pay them any attention. There were a lot of pictures of his mum and her friends at school. There were a surprising amount of pictures of James before the seventh year, years that Lily had supposedly hated him. He stared at the last picture. Lily was obviously extremely pregnant with him and James stood behind her, his arms wrapped around her stomach. He missed his parents. He missed Sirius. He wanted them to be alive and to have grown up with them. Life would have been so different had he not lived with the Dursleys those ten long years.

He turned his attention to the notebooks, taking the first one and reading the cover. "The Secret and Solemn Musings of the Wild Goddesses." Harry opened the cover and read the first page.

The Goddess of Word greets you, whoever you are that is reading this. May what has been written in here enlighten you to our lives and struggles. Just because we are Goddesses does not mean we have life easy.

The Goddess of the Moon welcomes you, traveler. You have made your way into a deep adventure. May the musings of this book not drive you insane, for if you are a mere mortal, it will.

The Goddess of Flora greets you as our most honored guest. If you are reading this, you are trusted and blessed by the three Wild Goddesses. May you forgive us our mistakes, for we were not and are not perfect. Celebrate our triumphs and mourn our losses.

Harry smiled as he turned the page.

GW wants it known that her true name is Samantha Prewitt and is more normally called Sam. She also wants it known the GM and GF are stupid for the sappiness they wrote on the last page.

GM wants it known that her truest name is Thia Lupin, though her mother tends to call her Synthia when she's in trouble. She also wants it known that GF should stop fawning over that picture of a certain Marauder and write her stuff down.

I am not fawning over it! I'm just deciding the best way to tear it up into a billion pieces. clears throat GF wants it known to all that her common name is Lily Evans. She also wants it to be very clear that she does NOT like JP and never will.

GW wishes to express her doubt of that fact and feels that she should let everyone know that the Wild Goddesses or WG's are first year students at Hogwarts.

GM agrees with GW on the fact that GF might indeed like the git, which I feel sorry for that fact.

GF hates GM and GW for their pathetic lies.

Harry smiled at the three friends. This would be a good read and he would learn a lot about his mum and her friends. Harry noticed that there were seven other notebooks with the title of The Secret and Solemn Musings of the Wild Goddesses. There were two other notebooks and Harry opened it up. He realized that they were letters written between his parents or just notes, because some of the messages were only a line or two long. At the bottom of the shoe box was a loose sheet of paper. Harry picked it up and realized that it was a letter addressed to him.

My little Harry,

I'm writing this letter knowing that if you read this I am dead. It's a humbling thought and I'm not sure if I really comprehend it or not. I'm sorry that I was not there to watch you grow up, to hug you and love you as a mother should. I gave Thia this shoebox to give to you on your sixteenth birthday. Your dad gave Remus something to give to you as well, though he won't tell me what.

I hope by now you've been told that damn Prophecy. If you haven't, put this letter down, find Dumbledore, and ask him about it. He's not getting out of that so easily! If you're still reading this, then you know about it.

Know this, prophecy is only a guide, it is not a command. If you don't want to face the prospect of fighting Voldemort, then don't. Good deeds done for the wrong reasons are not good deeds at all. I hope and wish that you do want to fulfill it. It may seem like a daunting task, but have no fear, you will be able to do it. I know you will. Love and good will always vanquish hate and evil. Those beyond this world see something in you, my dear son. Whatever it is, they know it is strong enough to help you defeat the monster.

Don't push those near you away! They are important and they are what make life worth living. Without those you love, life becomes a hollow shell. It is love that Voldemort doesn't understand, and he will always underestimate it. Use that to your advantage.

Harry, I love you. Your father loves you as well. I don't know if James is dead or not, but I suspect he will be. I wish I could have seen you grow up. James, I know, wishes the same thing. He probably won't think of writing you a letter, the daft prat. Maybe I'll get him to add a note to the end of this. Maybe not, he's playing around with Sirius, Remus, and Peter at the moment. There's no way I'll be able to drag him away from them.

Those four are troublemakers if I've seen some. I can't believe Sirius is going to be a dad. I hope you'll be able to meet your God-sibling. Of the Marauders, the only one I can really see as a dad is Remus,

and he's still single. Not that James isn't a good father to you; he's just too much of a child yet. Take for example what he and Sirius are up to at the moment. James took the last chicken leg and is taunting Sirius with it. He's going to get hit. Sirius takes his chicken seriously... Meh, I can't believe I just said that! I've been hanging out with the Marauders too much! Where's Thia when I need her?

Well, you're crying and James is in the middle of a wrestling match, so I have to go check on you. I hope Remus will make sure they don't hurt each other! Until we meet in the afterlife my dear son, keep yourself out of serious trouble and work hard on your school work.

Love you with all my heart,

Lily Potter

Harry—

So, Lily thought I wouldn't tear myself away from my friends long enough to write my son a letter! HA! I showed her! Of course, I'm hiding from Sirius at the moment, so maybe she has a point. Geh! I hate when she's right... which is almost always.

I love you son. Just make sure you remember that. She's probably right that if she's gone then I'm gone as well. I don't think I could live without your mother. But that's beside the point. It means that you grew up with neither of your parents, and I'm sorry about that. I wish I could have seen you grow up. Watch you play Quidditch for the Gryffindor house team. Watch you play around with your god-brother. I don't care what Lily and Thia think, it's going to be a boy. It wouldn't be right if it was a girl! Then again, you could marry said girl, and then Sirius and I would be related by marriage!

Sorry about the tangent... And sorry about the abrupt end, but Sirius just turned into his mutt form which means he'll find me in a sec. I love you, Harry. I always will. Until we see each other in the afterlife, get into as much trouble as possible and make your teachers pull their hair out at least once an hour. I have faith in you!

Love you, son,

James Potter

Harry set the letter down and stared at the wall without seeing it. Thia had been right all those weeks ago. Lily knew exactly what he needed. Chuckling through his tears, Harry put everything back into the shoe box and hid it under the loose floor board. Harry changed quickly into his pajamas and he opened the window so that Hedwig could leave if she wanted to. He climbed into bed, taking off his glasses as he went.

What would come would come. But he had people who loved him, and parents and a Godfather looking out for him from the other side. Harry fell asleep soon after that thought, and had the first peaceful night's sleep since before the final Quidditch game. It was a welcome change.

Second to Last Author's Note: Well, at least for this fic... I am planning/writing the sequel... hopefully I'll keep HBP separate from Lol as I do... I'm taking a small break for HBP and then am planning on coming back and writing... though it probably won't be til Sept. til I start posting if even then... I want to get a few chapters ahead and get used to being in college... so, yeah... Back to the chapter at hand:

Well, you had to wait for (doing math in head, which is always a bit ify)42(wow.. I didn't realize that it had been so long) chapters, but Harry has finally opened his mum's gift... and don't you agree... the boy needed it then... I'm not sure what the original gift was. I had written that chapter late at night and didn't write the contents down, absolutely stupid of me, seeing that I have a very bad memory. But I came up with this one soon after and here we are...

A little on the WG's Goddess names:

Samantha means "Told by God"

Ironically, when I named Thia Synthia, I didn't know what the name meant... which I think is the only character (along with Sam) that I didn't do a little research on... but Cynthia (the correct way to spell it) means: Moon Goddess... which is a bit ironic 'cause her older bro got bit by a werewolf and now is one himself...

And of course, Lily is the goddess of plants or flora!

We'll be seeing a bit more of the WG, don't worry... not to mention a few more of those pics... let's just say there are a few that Remus doesn't want to see again and a few Thia doesn't want Remus to know about...

Seeing that it's past my bedtime and it would take me FOREVER to do it tonight... I've decided that I'll come back with that mass thanks that I promised... I want to get this up and if I do that now, I'll be here until dawn... which would not be good at all... not at all... so, forgive me, let me sleep and I will be back with it! I promise!

Well, this is it... the last Author's Note for Lol... Harry is no longer the innocent little boy he was... he's semi-insane and revenge driven and guilt eaten now... how in the world will the next year progress? Stay tuned for Book Seven (I'm sorry for ever making fun of your title, Chris... though you went all of book 6 calling it that...) and I hope to hear from you soon!

loci

Last Author's Note, for reals

I said I would do this, and I must admit, it seems unbelievable daunting. But I said I would and as such I will! Anyways, I have to fix a stupid repetitive paragraph... I have a few comments at the end of the thank yous, please check it out! ... Might as well get on with this...

First and foremost:

goddessa39 What can I say? The first of the reviewers and probably the most, er, what would be a good word... the one to review the most... As to the wedding, wizards do it differently. :)

Kjady I feel honored that you've read it both on schnoogle and After I'm through with this, I'm planning to submit chapter 37 on schnoogle... It seems a bit surreal to me, actually.

Alen Thank you. Harry really doesn't have the drive to do anything about his situation.

Sirius009 I know you won't read this and I hope you enjoyed HBP. I'm glad you stopped reading, b/c this story would never please you.

Jaina Sanri Yes, the "weapon" is most interesting. evil smile Just wait... Just wait...

The Shadow Bandit I tried to answer you question about the will in an e-mail, but it wouldn't be delivered... so, I've cut and pasted the answer below (please note that JKR and I differ on this view completely)

Now the Will/what happened to Grimmauld... this is the question I answered a LOOOOOONG time ago in that A/N... According to the Ministry, Sirius is still alive and still on the run... They (the Order) have no proof that Sirius is innocent, so he's still a criminal... Now the Will... there is a Will (which Harry doesn't know about... and now that I think of it, neither should you... too late now...) BUT, seeing that the people that saw Sirius shouldn't really have seen him/aiding him/helping him hide from the Ministry, they haven't let that fact out... Just think if Shackbolt would go to work one day and said, "I watched Sirius Black die last night." That would lead to questions like "Why was he there?" "Has he rejoined Voldemort?" "How did he die?" Now the first two aren't so bad, but the last one is... "Well, Bellatrix killed him..." but Bella is a DE and that wouldn't make sense to them and it would lead to more sticky questions... more or less, every single Order member would eventually have to admit that they had been helping Sirius hide for the last few years, and that wouldn't be very good... Not at all...

Does that make sense? Let me know if it didn't...

Trek thanks for adding me to your fav. I find that an unbelievable honor, mainly cause I hardly do.

Nutty Al well, I wouldn't say that Harry isn't the only weapon to defeat Voldie. In fact, I don't think of him as a weapon at all. What JKR wrote

about prophecies in HBP is what I believe completely. All Harry and Voldie need to do is turn their backs... but they never will.

Bobmin356 another person that won't be reading this. I'm sorry you can't see Harry accepting that he listen to his Headmaster's decision. Harry tells Ginny why though, some battles cannot be won and he really wanted to go to Neville's later. DD did remember Harry's acceptance that day and thus let him go.

gwaihir87 I will never be able to stream-line my own work... Now, if I had a beta that would take that challenge on, not that I'd ever ask someone to... MEH! I'm glad you've enjoyed the fic!

guyute3965 Well, what can I say, JKR fulfilled even my wildest ship... Tonks/Remus! Glad that you've followed from Wizard Tales to Schnoogle to I did enjoy HBP and I'm getting really excited for college!

JeSsEmCcArTnEyRuLeZ Well, JKR made Draco get the mark as well. I can never see Draco being "good." But like JKR, I don't see him as a killer, though he has killed in my story. That's about all I can say on this...

nandhp Thanks for the review!

DarkPhoenix011 the biggest reason for so few reviews, is that it hasn't been on that long!

twinreader yes, the start is slow... just giving Harry some rest before the rest of the year... it starts like OotP on purpose... It doesn't continue like that at all...

Jake-A-Roe don't forget that Harry's made at Ron as well. His Occlumency lessons focus on keeping Voldie out, not on keeping his mind from torturing itself. Harry wasn't thinking everything through when he agreed to go in their stead. All he thought was: Don't want them to die. Voldie wants me. Trade myself for them. Get out soon. Of course, we all know how stupid it was, but at the time, to Harry, it was the only option.

Kychick42431 PheonixRun, a reader on Schnoogle, we have this joke. One of these times I won't put out something good... Of course, I won't do that to you guys (or myself) but it's fun to joke about.

Tipsy190 I am SOOOOOOOOOOOO sorry about that cliffie... of all the cliffies for you to get stuck on, it was that one! Yes, Arthur's death was a bit... hard to take...

Padfoot's Godchild Amen! Voldie and the DE are cowards! I luv my little Gryffindor, it's so much more fun writing his answer then the answer a Slytherin would have given.

gaul1 Gaul sacked Rome in 390 B.C. --- sorry--- thanks for the reviews and sorry bout that little random fact...

Ellie I'm already almost finished with chapter 2 of the sequel!

milygo Thanks for the review!

Els Why thank you!

Jeefus ONLY FORTY-SIX! Are you out of your mind! That's huge!

Earl I hope you liked the gift.

Schnuff Who said Harry was sane? Or even that he had nightmares EVERY night... the person would finish them 'cause he wants to beat a certain dark wizard... Harry's very determined about that. Thia has nothing to do with Harry's time at Hogwarts. She actually did a very good job at protecting him. I would have a party, if you could really call that a party. Same lame ending, that JKR uses, only she'll be starting book 7 with it... Though, I do agree that it's about time DD realized it was just pointless sending him there. Lily gave Harry what he needed, a strong connection to them and a way to find the answers to questions those living don't want to answer. As to ratboy... can't really say much... I'm sorry that the last chapters were such a let down for you. They were finished a month before I finally got them up and they were exactly what I had planned. Hope you stick around for the sequel, give me a chance to explain and redeem myself...

darkcelestial Yes, Snape's Patronus is a butterfly... a symbol of new life and resurrection... Snape had a very bad, bad time in his life and has finally started to heal, as if coming back from the dead... Of course I'm working on the sequel, I've already gotten two chapters done (well, almost done)!

DoomGazeZero Sorry to see you leave... Wish you could of pulled through the fight like the trio did.

Already writing the sequel, though I want to get a ways before I start submitting...

Kelei I was writing chapter two before I started this and once this is up, I'll be finishing it up!

Lee Swain I'm gonna finish this fic's sequel off and then return to one I left behind... It'll be a while before I write a book 7 to follow HBP... I need to re-read it a few times first... hehe...

Imgonnadie Thanks, I'm gonna need all the wishing I can get!

scrivania well, I don't blame you at all. It's not like the fic has been on for all that long! Hope you stick around for book 7!

First, one last thank you to you all! Reviews make writing all that more fun!

Second, I have yet (to my remembrance) thanked my beta's on this site, so:

Thank you! Pixie and , you both pulled through for me at the very last second! Lara, my wonderful brit-pic, thank you for keeping me from using words that mean something very different elsewhere in the world! And Cassie and Chris, for keeping me CHAPTERS ahead of what I'm currently submitting and for helping when I get stuck and for not ruining HBP while we're chatting last Friday night/Saturday morning and for being great friends.

Third, the state of the Sequel to Loss of Innocence. I am writing it. I will continue writing it through out the next busy month, for writing is a way to keep me grounded and sane. However, I won't be posting until September. This is for several reasons. I want a good title for the book, and I won't be able to pick one for several more chapters. Second, I want to be far ahead of what I submit, so that if something goes wrong with the writing, I'll have chapters to put up and you won't notice. Third, if I decided the plot isn't working, I can go back and change it... which I did with Lol a few times. Fourth, I don't want your reviews to change what I want. I'm writing this first and foremost for me. You might not have liked the fight between the Trio, but I did, and had it not been written completely at the time, I would have been tempted to change what I wanted.

I hope you don't mind too much about the gap in between. I know I don't like it when it happens to me, but I feel like I must. Just know that I'm writing and I'm really excited about finishing of Voldie!

Thanks again!

loci

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